



Sifting Through  
the Madness for the  
Word, the Line,  
the Way

**Charles Bukowski**

# Charles Bukowski

sifting through the madness  
for the Word, the line, the way

n e w   p o e m s

edited by john martin



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the way to create art is to burn and destroy  
ordinary concepts and to substitute them  
with new truths that run down from the top of the head  
and out from the heart.

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## part 1

why is it that the pickup truck  
carrying the loose refrigerator  
on the freeway  
is always going between  
80 and 90 m.p.h.?



## so you want to be a writer?

if it doesn't come bursting out of you  
in spite of everything,  
don't do it.

unless it comes unmasked out of your  
heart and your mind and your mouth  
and your gut,  
don't do it.

if you have to sit for hours  
staring at your computer screen  
or hunched over your  
typewriter  
searching for words,  
don't do it.

if you're doing it for money or  
fame,  
don't do it.

if you're doing it because you want  
women in your bed,  
don't do it.

if you have to sit there and  
rewrite it again and again,  
don't do it.

if it's hard work just thinking about doing it,  
don't do it.

if you're trying to write like somebody  
else,  
forget about it.

if you have to wait for it to roar out of  
you,  
then wait patiently.  
if it never does roar out of you,  
do something else.

if you first have to read it to your wife  
or your girlfriend or your boyfriend  
or your parents or to anybody at all,  
you're not ready.

don't be like so many writers,  
don't be like so many thousands of  
people who call themselves writers,  
don't be dull and boring and  
pretentious, don't be consumed with self-  
love.

the libraries of the world have  
yawned themselves to  
sleep

over your kind.

don't add to that.

don't do it.

unless it comes out of  
your soul like a rocket,  
unless being still would  
drive you to madness or  
suicide or murder,

don't do it.

unless the sun inside you is  
burning your gut,

don't do it.

when it is truly time,  
and if you have been chosen,  
it will do it by  
itself and it will keep on doing it  
until you die or it dies in  
you.

there is no other way.

and there never was.

## my secret life

as a child  
I suppose  
I was not quite  
normal.

my happiest times were  
when  
I was left alone in  
the house on a  
Saturday.

there was a large  
old-fashioned  
stand-up  
Victrola  
in the front  
room.  
you wound it  
up with a  
handle on the  
right-hand  
side.

my favorite time  
of the day  
was late  
afternoon.  
it was shady then,  
it was  
quiet.

I'd take out all the  
phonograph records

and spread them  
out on the floor  
around the  
room.

I preferred the  
ones with the dark  
purple  
label.

I only played  
those.  
but I didn't really like  
the  
music  
very  
much.

I'd hold my finger  
against the spinning  
record  
and slow down the  
sound.

I liked that  
better.

I played all the  
records with the  
purple label  
over and over,  
slowing down the  
sound.



as I slowed the  
music down,  
interesting things  
happened in my  
head  
but they were  
momentary:  
I would see a  
waterfall, then it  
would quickly  
vanish.

or I would see  
my father putting  
on his leather  
slippers in the  
morning  
or a  
tiger killing  
something.

I kept seeing  
brief glimpses  
of many things  
before they  
vanished  
but sometimes  
I'd see  
nothing unusual,  
just the purple  
label  
revolving  
revolving

and I'd attempt to  
read the print  
as the record  
turned.

finally I would put  
all the records  
carefully  
away  
and I would  
rewind the  
machine  
and watch the  
turntable  
spin.  
it was covered  
with green  
felt  
and I would  
alter the speed  
of the turntable  
by holding my  
finger against  
it.

after that,  
I would go to  
the front window  
and peek through the  
drapes at the lady  
across the street.  
she sat on the  
front steps

of her house  
most of the day,  
her legs crossed  
as she smoked  
her cigarettes.  
she spoke to our  
neighbors as they  
walked by and  
she had long silken  
legs.  
she laughed often  
and seemed  
happy:  
she was not  
at all  
like my  
mother.

I'd watch her for  
a long  
time.  
I'd watch her  
until she went  
back into her  
house.

next was the  
clock on the  
mantel.  
it had a large  
sweeping  
second  
hand.

then the contest  
would  
begin:  
me against the  
second  
hand.

I would position  
myself on the  
floor  
so that I could  
watch  
the second  
hand.

I would wait until  
it touched the  
twelve,  
then I would  
hold my  
breath.  
I would hold  
it as long as  
possible,  
timing  
myself.

then I would  
begin  
again,  
holding my  
breath  
in an attempt

to hold it  
longer than  
I was able to  
the last  
time.

I would note the  
time that had passed,  
then I would  
begin once again  
in an  
attempt to  
better that  
time.

each time  
I would  
be able to hold  
my breath  
a little  
longer.

but it became  
more and more  
difficult.

I'd hear an  
excited announcer's  
voice:  
"THIS TIME, LADIES  
AND GENTLEMEN,  
THERE WILL SURELY BE A

NEW WORLD'S  
RECORD!"

it got hard,  
it got very hard,  
holding my breath,  
but the world  
record was  
important.

I could no longer  
just lie there  
holding it  
in,  
I had to clench  
my fists  
and roll about on  
the rug.  
I'd close my eyes  
while  
flashes of light  
exploded inside  
my head,  
explosions of color,  
red, blue,  
purple!

at last,  
I'd breathe  
in and  
look at the  
clock:

I HAD SET A NEW  
WORLD'S RECORD  
15 SECONDS LONGER  
THAN THE OLD  
ONE!

then I'd get  
up,  
go into the  
kitchen and drink  
a glass of  
water.  
I always drank a  
glass of water,  
then.  
I don't know  
why.

soon after that  
my parents would  
come home,  
first my mother,  
then my  
father.

my mother wouldn't  
say much,  
she'd be busy in  
the kitchen,  
but my father  
always had something  
to say  
and it was always

the  
same:  
“well, Henry, what  
have you been doing  
all day?”

“nothing.”

“nothing? what the  
hell kind of answer is  
that?”

I wouldn't reply,  
not to him,  
he would never  
know,  
I'd die before I  
would tell him  
anything,  
he could kill me  
before I'd tell  
him.

him and his shoes,  
him and his ears,  
him and his hairy  
arms.

whatever it was  
I had  
done,  
it belonged only to  
me.



## the column

to avoid the inexplicable had always been  
a necessity for me.

and so this day in 1942  
I was 21 years old  
sitting on a park bench  
with and like the  
other bums

when the war chariots  
rolled by

soldiers on their way  
to war  
and the soldiers saw  
me  
hated me

began yelling and cursing  
at me

asking me what the hell I  
thought I was doing there!

I was the only young bum  
in the park.

the soldiers wanted me to be going  
with them.

the whole column of them  
screamed and cursed at  
me

as they drove  
by.

then the column was  
gone and the old bum  
next to me  
asked, “how come you  
ain’t in the Service,  
son?”

I got up and walked  
down to the library.

I went inside  
found a book and  
sat down  
at a table.

I began to read  
the book.  
the meaning was  
too deep  
for me  
then.

so I put it  
back on the shelf  
walked back outside  
and waited.

## commerce

I used to drive those trucks so hard  
and for so long that  
my right foot would  
go dead from pushing down on the  
accelerator.  
delivery after delivery,  
14 hours at a time  
for \$1.10 per hour  
under the table,  
up one-way alleys in the worst parts of  
town.  
at midnight or at high noon,  
racing between tall buildings  
always with the stink of something  
dying or about to die  
in the freight elevator  
at your destination,  
a self-operated elevator,  
opening into a large bright room,  
uncomfortably so  
under unshielded lights  
over the heads of many women  
each bent mute over a machine,  
crucified alive  
on piecework,  
to hand the package then  
to a fat son of a bitch in red  
suspenders.  
he signs, ripping through the cheap  
paper  
with his ballpoint pen,  
that's power,  
that's America at work.

you think of killing him  
on the spot  
but discard that thought and  
leave,  
down into the urine-stinking  
elevator,  
they have you crucified too,  
America at work,  
where they rip out your intestines  
and your brain and your  
will and your spirit.  
they suck you dry, then throw  
you away.  
the capitalist system.  
the work ethic.  
the profit motive.  
the memory of your father's words,  
"work hard and you'll be  
appreciated."  
of course, only if you make  
much more for them than they pay  
you.

out of the alley and into the  
sunlight again,  
into heavy traffic,  
planning the route to your next stop,  
the best way, the time-  
saver,  
you knowing none of the tricks  
and to actually think about  
all the deliveries that still lie ahead  
would lead to

madness.  
*it's one at a time,*  
easing in and out of traffic  
between other work-driven drivers  
also with no concept of danger,  
reality, flow or  
compassion.  
you can feel the despair  
escaping from their  
machines,  
their lives as hopeless and  
as numbed as  
yours.

you break through the cluster  
of them  
on your way to the next  
stop,  
driving through teeming downtown  
Los Angeles in 1952,  
stinking and hungover,  
no time for lunch,  
no time for coffee,  
you're on route #10,  
a new man,  
give the new man the  
ball-busting route,  
see if he can swallow the  
whale.

you look down and the  
needle is on  
red.

almost no gas left.  
too fucking bad.  
you gun it,  
lighting a crushed cigarette with  
one hand from a soiled pack of  
matches.

shit on the world.

## the Mexican fighters

watching the boxing matches from Mexico  
on tv while sitting in bed  
on a cool November evening.  
had a great day at the track, picking 7  
of 9, two of them long shots.  
no matter, I am watching the fighters  
work hard now, showing more courage than  
style  
as in the front row two fat men talk to  
each other,  
paying no attention to the  
boxers  
who are fighting for their very existence  
as human beings.  
sitting in bed here, I feel sad for  
everybody, for all the struggling people  
everywhere, trying to get the rent paid on time,  
trying to get enough food, trying to get  
an easy night's sleep.  
it's all very wearing and it doesn't stop until you  
die.  
what a circus, what a show, what a  
farce  
from the Roman Empire to the French-  
Indian War, and from there to here!

now, one of the Mexican boys has  
floored the other.  
the crowd is screaming.  
the boy is up at 9.  
he nods to the referee that he is  
ready to go again.  
the fighters rush together.

even the fat men in the front row are  
excited now.  
the red gloves fiercely punch the air and the  
faces and the hard brown  
bodies.

then  
the boy is down again.  
he is flat on his back.  
it's over.

the god-damned thing is over.

for that boy, there is no knowing where he is  
going now.  
for the other boy, it's going to be good for  
a little while.  
he smiles in tune with the  
world.

I flick off the tv.

after a moment I hear gunshots off somewhere in the  
distance.  
the contest of life continues.

I get up, walk to the window.  
I feel disturbed, I mean about  
people and things, the way of  
things.

then I'm sitting back on the bed, with many  
feelings passing through me that I can't quite



comprehend.

then I force myself to stop thinking.  
some questions don't have answers.

what the hell, I had 7 for 9 at the track today, that's something  
even in the midst of a lot of  
nothing.

what you do is take whatever luck comes your way and pretend  
you know more than you ever  
will.

right?

## this dog

look at this place! stockings and shorts and trash all  
over the floor! you just don't want to be responsible!  
to you a woman is nothing but something  
for your *convenience!* you just sit there slurping up  
everything I do for you!  
why don't you say something?

this is your place so you have to listen! if I was  
talking to you like this at my place you'd walk right  
out the door!

why are you smiling?  
is something funny?

all you do is slurp up all my love and caring  
and then go to the racetrack!  
what's so great about a horse?  
what's a horse got that I haven't got?

four legs?

aren't you bright?  
aren't you funny?  
now aren't you the thing?

you act like nothing matters!  
well, let me tell you something, asshole, *I matter!*  
you think you're the only man in this town?  
well, let me tell you, there are plenty of men who  
want me, my body, my mind, my spirit!

many people have asked me, "what are you doing  
with a person like him?"

what?

no, I don't want a drink!

I want you to realize what's happening to our relationship  
before it's too late!

look at you still slurping all this up!

you think you're so wonderful!

you know what happens to you when you drink  
too much?

I might as well be living with a eunuch!

my mother warned me!

everybody warned me!

look at you now!

why don't you try to communicate?

why don't you shave?

you've spilled wine all over the front of your shirt!

and that cheap cigar!

you know what that thing smells

like?

like horseshit!

hey, where are you going?

to some bar, to some stinking bar!

you'll sit there nursing your self-pity

with all those other losers!

if you go out through that door I'm going  
out dancing!

I'll go meet a new man!

I'll go have some fun!

if you go out that door, then it's over between us  
forever!

all right, go on then, you asshole!

asshole!

asshole!

**ASSHOLE!**

## the great escape

listen, he said, you ever seen a bunch of crabs in a bucket?

no, I told him.

well, what happens is that now and then one crab will climb up on top of the others

and begin to climb toward the top of the bucket,

then, just as he's about to escape

another crab grabs him and pulls him back down.

really? I asked.

really, he said, and this job is just like that, none of the others want anybody to get out of

here. that's just the way it is

in the postal service!

I believe you, I said.

just then the supervisor walked up and said,

you fellows were talking.

there is no talking allowed on this job.

I had been there eleven and one-half years.

I got up off my stool and climbed right up the supervisor

and then I reached up and pulled myself right out of there.

it was so easy it was unbelievable.

but none of the others followed me.

and after that, whenever I had crab legs  
I thought about that place.  
I must have thought about that place  
maybe 5 or 6 times

before I switched to lobster.

## a quick one

in 5 minutes I am going  
to get into my  
jacuzzi  
but first please take  
a picture of this:  
a 70-year-old  
white whale lurking  
within the warm white  
whirling water.

how did he last?  
how did he escape  
all the harpoons  
for all those years?  
why didn't he get beached  
along the way  
on the dry  
shore?  
how did he evade so many  
schools of hungry  
sharks?

now see this:  
his little eyes peering just  
above the bubbling  
water . . .

what a miracle!

life is full of happy  
miracles  
here in the cool dark  
winter evening.

in the stratosphere  
the jealous gods shiver  
and moan  
while  
the white whale floats  
blissfully  
in the warm white  
water  
where it's always  
104 degrees  
of  
heaven on  
earth.



## the old anarchist

my neighbor gives me the key to his house  
when he goes on vacation.

I feed his cats  
water his flowers and his  
lawn.

I place his mail in a neat stack  
on his dining room table.

am I the same man who planned to  
blow up the city of Los Angeles  
15 years ago?

I lock his door.  
I walk down his front walk  
pause  
stretch a moment  
in the sunset thinking,  
there's still time,  
there's still time for a  
comeback.  
I have never belonged with  
these others.

I walk down the sidewalk  
toward my place

being careful  
not to step  
on the cracks.

## and I still won't vote

10 boxes of crackerjack left over from  
Halloween.

I give them to the gardeners.

I am the great man on this plantation.

I bring beer to the workers.

they play their transistor radios

listen to the crap music

in the sun.

they suck at their beer,

break open the boxes of

Crackerjack.

they chew

rotting their mouths and their brains

as I phone my financial adviser at

Salomon Brothers.

he says, copper, put it into

copper.

I'll consider that, I tell him.

I hang up, walk out on the

balcony, watch the men in the 98-degree

heat.

“you're doing a great job, fellows!”

a nice bright-eyed fellow up near the

front

asks,

“do you want us to do the planting too?”

“no, you fellows do the shit work, I’ll  
do the planting, I’ll take the glory.”

they don’t laugh.  
I wave, walk back inside.

then I feel the need to excrete.  
I ponder whether to use  
the front crapper  
the back crapper  
or  
the upstairs crapper.

I decide on the upstairs crapper, walk  
up the marble stairway thinking, it has  
taken you sixty years, Chinaski, to finally  
plunder the American economic system.

## just trying to do a good deed

she was right when she told me, “you only go with my sister because she’s younger than I am. you’re prejudiced against older people and dislike fat women.”

“when’s she coming home?” I asked her. “where is she?”

“don’t worry about her, I’m talking to you now.  
tell me, what’s wrong with me?”

“you’re too old and you’re fat,” I told her.

“but so are you,” she said.

“I’m not fat,” I said.

“you’re overweight,” she said.

“all right, stop bitching, come on, we’ll fuck.”

“what did you say?”

“you heard me.”

we sat there without speaking then.  
I nodded toward the bedroom a few times but she just sat there.

suddenly the door opened and the  
younger sister appeared.  
the fat sister jumped up.

she pointed to me.

“HE WANTED TO FUCK ME!”

the younger sister looked at me.

“is this true?”

“no,” I said, “I didn’t want to.”

“BUT HE OFFERED TO!” screamed the  
older sister.

“well?” the younger sister asked me.

“it’s true,” I said.

“YOU GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!”

I got up and walked out the door  
and across the sidewalk to my  
car.

“I TOLD YOU HE WAS NO GOOD!”  
I heard the fat sister scream.

“OH, SHUT UP!” I heard the younger  
sister scream.

I got into my car and drove  
away.

when I got to my place the phone  
was ringing.

I picked it up, hung it up,  
then took it off the  
hook.

better to be safe than  
sorry.

## one step removed

I knew a lady who once lived with Hemingway.  
I knew a lady who claimed to have screwed Ezra Pound.  
Sartre invited me to visit him in Paris but I was too stupid to  
accept.  
Caresse Crosby of Black Sun Press wrote me from Italy.  
Henry Miller's son wrote that I was a better writer than his  
father.  
I drank wine with John Fante.  
but none of this matters at all except in a romantic sort of  
way.  
some day they'll be talking about me:  
"Chinaski wrote me a letter."  
"I saw Chinaski at the racetrack."  
"I watched Chinaski wash his car."  
all absolute nonsense.  
meanwhile, some wild-eyed young man  
alone and unknown in a room  
will be writing things that will make you forget  
everybody else  
except maybe the young man to  
follow after  
him.

## my life as a sitcom

stepped into the wrong end of the jacuzzi and twisted my right leg which was bad to begin with, then that night got drunk with a tv writer and an actor, something about using my life to make a sitcom and luckily that fell through and the next day at the track I get a box seat in the dining area, get a menu and a glass of water, my leg is really paining me, I can barely walk to the betting window and back, then about the 3rd race the waiter rushes by, asks, "can I borrow your menu?" but he doesn't wait for an answer, he just grabs it and runs off.

a couple of races go by, I fight through my pain and continue to make my bets, get back, sit down just as the waiter rushes by again. he grabs all my silverware and my napkin and runs off.

"HEY!" I yell but he's gone.

all around me people are eating, drinking and laughing.

I check my watch after the 6th race and it is 4:30 p.m.

I haven't been served yet and I'm 72 years old with a hangover and a leg from hell.

I pull myself to my feet by the edge of the table and manage to hobble about looking for the *maitre d'*. I see him down a far aisle and wave him in.

"can I speak to you?" I ask.

"certainly, sir!"

"look, it's the 7th race, they took my menu and my silverware and I haven't been served yet."

"we'll take care of it right away, sir!"

well, the 7th race went, the 8th race went, and still no service.

I purchase my ticket for the 9th race and take the escalator down.

on the first floor, I purchase a sandwich.

I eat it going down another escalator to the parking lot.

the valet laughs as I slowly work my leg into the



car, making a face of pain as I do so.  
“got a gimpy leg there, huh, Hank?” he asks.  
I pull out, make it to the boulevard and onto the  
freeway which immediately begins to slow down because  
of a 3-car crash ahead.

I snap on the radio in time to find that my horse  
has run out in the 9th.  
a flash of pain shoots up my right leg.  
I decide to tell my wife about my  
misfortunes at the track  
even though I know she will respond  
by telling me that everything as always  
was completely my fault  
but when a man is in pain he can't think right,  
he only asks for  
more.

and  
gets it.

## a mechanical Lazarus

I don't know how long I've had this  
IBM Selectric typewriter: 12 years  
maybe: it's typed thousands of poems,  
dozens of short stories, two or three  
novels and a screenplay.

I've spilled beer, wine,  
whiskey, vodka, ale plus  
cigarette and cigar ash  
into it  
with never a breakdown.

and I don't know how many hours  
of classical music we've listened  
to together.

the nights have always been  
long and good  
with always the promise of  
laughter behind our most  
serious  
moments.

then I received a computer for  
Christmas.

I mean, we must keep up with the  
times. no?

after all, the old manual standard  
that preceded the electric typewriter  
now sits downstairs  
in dignified retirement

and we too have shared many  
magical and crazy  
nights.

I mean, men once wrote with  
quill pens.  
we must move on.

so I cleared the desk off for the new  
computer.

then I pulled the plug on the  
electric, covered it and  
carried it over to the corner  
of the room and set it  
down.

that was the worst part—carrying it off  
like that.

it was like it was something alive.

I half expected it to speak,  
as it often had, in its own  
way.

I felt as if I had turned a pet  
dog out into the cold  
street.

then my daughter  
who is a computer whiz  
came over to set things up

for me and to show me  
the basic techniques.

she left and I began playing  
with the computer.  
it did some wonderful  
things  
but then I noticed certain  
inconsistencies.  
the machine wouldn't do  
some of the things they claimed  
it would.

my wife tried her hand at  
it.  
same thing.

so we shut the machine down  
and went to  
sleep.

the next day  
when I came home from the  
track  
my wife told me that the  
computer had a glitch or a  
possible  
virus.  
my daughter had worked on it  
all afternoon to  
no avail.

so  
for the time  
being  
my old IBM has  
risen from the grave,  
the bottle of beer  
is to my left, and the little red  
radio to my right is  
playing  
Bach.

my old  
electric warrior  
is back  
typing this now  
as the many parts of the  
computer are  
scattered across the  
rug.

*bravo!*

my god

you know that little girl  
who used to play  
on the lawn across the street?

look what happened  
overnight:

new breasts  
round ass  
long legs  
long hair

eyes of  
blue fire.

we can no longer  
think of her  
as before.

now she is  
15 years full of  
trouble.

## after the sandstorm

coming off that park bench after the all-night  
sandstorm in El Paso  
and walking into the library  
I felt fairly comfortable even though I had less than  
two dollars  
was alone in the world  
and was 40 pounds underweight.  
still it felt almost pleasant to  
open that copy of the *Kenyon Review* in  
1940  
and marvel at the brilliant way those  
professors used the language to take one another  
to task for the way each interpreted literature.  
I almost appreciated their humor and sarcasm,  
but not quite: the professorial envy for one another  
was a bit too rancid and  
red-steel-hot; but at the same time I envied the  
leisurely and safe lives that language and literature  
had evolved for them: places safe and  
soft and institutionalized.  
I knew that I would never be able to write or live in  
quite that manner, yet I almost wanted to be  
one of them then,  
at that moment.

I put the magazine back and walked outside,  
looked south north east west

each direction was wrong.  
I started to walk along.

what I did sense was that language  
properly used

could be bright and beautiful but  
I also sensed that there might be  
some more important things I had  
to learn  
first.



## carry on!

the famous actor came by, I poured him a wine  
as he sat near the warm fireplace. he was  
really a nice fellow, had been in the business  
for decades, said that he really liked what I  
wrote. I told him, “thank you,” and poured him  
another wine.

then he began to describe his new tv  
series about a man and a woman  
who adopted 3rd World children that nobody else  
wanted.

“I mean,” he said, “we’re going to try to capture  
the spirit of  
loving family relationships and the goodness of  
it all.”

he was quite sincere, nothing phony about his  
desire.

“I realize,” I said, “that uplifting family  
programs are becoming very  
popular but . . .”

(I was thinking of the black actor, also with  
great talent,  
who was on top of the ratings with his  
black family  
but I often wondered what blacks in  
the ghettos thought about the comfortable  
problems of those well-dressed, well-fed  
actors)

“. . . but there is another kind of family series I'd like to see that's more real and more a part of our culture.”

he smiled. “what's that?”

“I'd like to see a series about a guy who works all day long in a factory, fighting to keep the job he hates but is afraid of losing, while the foreman continually chews out his ass during the long hard hours. this guy finally punches out at the end of the day, gets into his old car and is grateful when it starts just one more time.

then he drives back to his flat where the rent eats up one-half of his salary. he walks in the door where his 3 kids in filthy clothes and dirty faces are bouncing a tennis ball against the walls while his fat wife is passed out on the couch, snoring. then he walks into the kitchen and the family dinner is burnt black on the stove with the gas still turned up high.”

“well,” said the actor, “what *we* are trying to do is uplift the spirit of the people, give them hope and some sense of what a loving family is like.”

“yes,” I agreed, “that's nice too.”

we talked some more and I mentioned

some of the movies I had seen him in and enjoyed.

he kindly countered, singled out some of my writing that had pleased him.  
then he had to leave, told me, "listen, we have to get together soon again!"

"anytime," I said.

he phoned a couple of days later early in the morning  
and read me a poem about a fantasy baseball game:  
if you had 2 strikes against you: "CARRY ON!"  
and if you dropped an easy fly ball:  
"CARRY ON!" and if you were one run behind in  
the 9th inning with 2 outs and you struck out with  
the bases loaded: "CARRY ON!" and etc.

and  
it was a rhyming  
poem.

"thank you very much," I told  
him.

"we've just got to get together again,"  
he said. "I love the way you talk!"

"sure," I said, "anytime you get the  
chance. my time is  
anytime."

I waited a few days, then phoned him  
twice.  
once I got somebody who was  
a secretary of some  
sort.  
the next time I got his  
wife.

each time I left the message that  
I was looking forward  
to a visit from the famous  
actor.

but now  
weeks have gone by and still no  
word.

well, a family tv series can be a  
very demanding  
experience.  
people get busy, you know  
that.

the other night I was sitting in front  
of the cable  
flicking the remote control  
and there came *his* face on the  
screen  
in some old  
movie.

I watched: a tremendous talent, no  
doubt.

then I hit the remote control again and got the  
wrestling matches: Greenbutt Gus vs.  
The Swamp Man.

both also  
tremendous  
talents,  
no doubt.

## straw hats

I would never buy one, not at my  
age, and I was never a  
hat man anyhow  
but then  
that's what wives are for:  
to give you the incentive to  
dive into uncharted  
waters.

“go on, go on in,” said my  
wife.

so I went into the shop and she  
followed.  
there were straw hats  
everywhere, all colors and  
sizes.

I tried on a black one, walked to  
the mirror, looked like a killer  
and, of course, liked that one best  
but  
returned the hat  
anyhow.

“here,” said my wife,  
“try this.”

I tried it on. not  
bad. then  
another one. not  
bad.

I decided on those two.  
holy hell!

I liked the clerks, they were  
totally  
uninterested.

“should I put them in a  
bag?” one of the clerks  
asked.

“a box,” I replied.

then  
my wife came around the corner,  
smiling, wearing a  
straw hat  
with a very wide brim.  
she looked much better than  
I.  
she looked  
cute.  
beautiful.

“get it,” I  
said.

“should I?”

“of course.”

so we walked out of there with  
our new straw

hats  
and we took them back  
to the car  
and put them  
in their boxes  
on the back  
seat  
and it was a good drive  
home  
under the low  
clouds,  
nothing wrong at  
all.  
very strange and  
totally  
acceptable.

and I never would have  
worn the black one  
anyhow.



## drink and wait

well, first Mae West died  
and then George Raft,  
and Eddie G. Robinson's  
been gone  
a long time,  
and Bogart and Gable  
and Grable,  
and Laurel and  
Hardy  
and the Marx Brothers,  
all those Saturday  
afternoons  
at the movies  
as a boy  
are gone now  
and I look  
around this room  
and it looks back at me  
and out through  
the window pane,  
time hangs helpless  
from the doorknob  
as a gold  
paperweight  
of an owl  
looks up at me  
(an old man now)  
who must endure  
these many empty  
Saturday  
afternoons.

## basking in the evil light

it all happened  
many years ago  
at Eveningtide Jr. High School.  
I suppose it started in the boys' shower  
after gym class when we decided  
that Harold Flemming had the  
largest penis at  
Eveningtide, only  
in Harold's case his penis was,  
we decided,  
almost beyond  
human comprehension.

anyhow, he had a big  
one and  
the word got  
out  
and almost everybody knew about  
it except  
Miss Tully who taught  
Biology.

the boys knew, the girls knew, the  
gym teachers  
knew  
and  
for some reason  
it really bothered Masterson who  
taught gym.  
he was a little bully with a pot  
belly who had the  
hots for

Mrs. Gredis who taught  
English.

well, there were 3 of us who  
hung out  
together:  
me, Danny Hightower and Harold  
Flemming.  
Masterson kept giving us  
hard looks for no  
reason.

one day he stopped us  
outside the  
cafeteria: "I'm going to  
find out what you 3 are  
up to even if I have to  
follow you to the  
ends of the  
earth!"

we laughed at him because  
we hadn't done  
anything wrong.

when we laughed he got  
pissed and gave us  
2 weeks on  
lunch-garbage  
detail.

on that detail we emptied  
garbage cans

during lunchtime  
and speared  
pieces of paper with  
nail-tipped sticks.

the girls watched us  
and  
giggled while  
slyly glancing at Harold  
Flemming.  
they also  
put their heads together and  
whispered while they  
giggled.

it felt great to get all  
that  
attention.  
Danny Hightower loved  
it too.  
Flemming?  
well, he never said  
much.

then it happened over-  
night: one day I came to  
school and both Danny Hightower and  
Flemming were  
missing.

I soon got the  
word: Harold  
Flemming had

had intercourse with some  
girl  
behind the  
chemistry building and  
had  
almost  
torn her  
apart.

and somehow Danny  
Hightower was  
involved.  
but what he had  
to do with it  
wasn't entirely  
clear.

then  
a couple of  
weeks later  
further word  
came down: Harold  
Flemming and Danny  
Hightower were at  
Gateford Hills, the Boys  
Reformatory.

it was soon after  
that when  
Masterson  
stopped me outside the  
cafeteria.

he looked very  
intense.  
he looked like he was  
ready to  
swing at me.

I hoped he  
would.  
I felt I could take  
him.

“all right,” he said,  
“I know you were there!  
I’m going to  
get you  
too!”

“yeah?” I  
asked.

“you think I  
won’t?”

I didn’t  
answer.

“stop *sneering!*” he  
yelled.

I hadn’t  
realized  
that I  
was.

“2 weeks garbage!” he  
yelled.

I shrugged and walked  
off  
pretending to be  
very tough and  
evil  
pretending I was  
just one more  
great secret fucker of  
jr. high school  
girls

but I knew  
without Harold Flemming  
at my side  
that I was  
nothing

and worse

the girls knew it  
too.

## what can I do?

it's true:  
pain and suffering  
helps to create  
what we call  
art.

given the choice  
I'd never choose  
this damned  
pain  
and suffering  
for myself  
but somehow it finds  
me

as the royalties  
continue to  
roll on  
in.



out of the sickroom and into  
the white blazing sun

hey, you're not dead, you're  
doing good, damned good again,  
what's this talk about tossing it  
in?

what you were doing while you  
were feeling sick enough  
to die,  
what you were really doing was just re-  
charging your  
batteries.

now let everybody get  
out of the way,  
you're thundering  
down the track again  
like a locomotive  
hauling 90 thousand  
unwritten poems  
and they're all  
yours  
and you're pounding along  
the rails  
sometimes through dark tunnels  
but then roaring out again  
into the  
light!

who the hell said that  
you no longer had it in  
you?

it was you who said that.

the engineer

who is now  
feeling a fresh surge of  
hope and  
power  
and who is  
grinning madly at the  
thought of this  
wonderful  
new  
day.

## temporal ease

you can't know how good it feels driving in for a wash-and-wax with nothing to do but light a cigarette and wait in the sun with no overdue rent, no troubles to speak of as you hide from the whores.

now here it comes, clean, glistening black, you tip the man \$2, get in, run up the aerial, adjust the side mirror, start the engine, turn on the radio classical, move out into the street.

open the sun roof, take the slow lane, hangover gone, you're sleepy in the sun . . . and then you're there.

the parking lot attendants know you: "hey, Champ, how's it going?"

inside, you open the *Racing Form*, decide to spend the day with the runners . . . already you've spotted two low-price sucker bets in the first race that will not win—that's all you need, an edge.

"Hank . . ."

it's somebody behind you, you turn, it's your old post office buddy, Spencer Bishop.

"hey, Spence . . ."

"hey, man, I hear you been fooling the people, I hear you been going around to the universities and giving lectures . . ."

"that's right, my man."

“what are you going to do when they find you out?”

“I’ll come back and join you.”

you go to your seat and watch them come out for the  
post parade

(you could be painting or in the botanical gardens)

but the 6 looks good in the *Form* and in the flesh.

½ is not the world but it’s over a third.

you get up and move to the windows.

the screenplay is finished, you’re into the 4th

novel, the poems keep arriving, not much going on with  
the short story but that’s waiting, fixing itself

up, that whore is getting ready.

“ten-win-six,” you say to the teller.

it’s the beginning of a most pleasant afternoon.

my next university lecture will be  
THE POSITIVE INFLUENCE  
OF GAMBLING  
AS A MEANS OF  
DEFINING EXPERIENCE AS  
SOMETHING THAT  
CAN BE TOUCHED LIKE  
A BOOK OF MATCHES OR  
A SOUP SPOON.

yes, you think, going back to sit down,  
it’s true.

## you never liked me

I let Reena give you a blow job  
even though she was my wife,  
I used to drive you to all your  
poetry readings  
and I have some photographs  
of you in compromising  
positions  
with that hooker  
but I've never shown them to  
anyone.

Reena and I shared that motel  
room with you down at Hermosa  
Beach where you  
tried to rape Robert's  
widow  
and I guess you don't  
remember demanding that  
the manager turn on the  
swimming pool lights at  
3:30 a.m.?  
you tried to  
drown him  
afterwards  
and I was the guy  
who stopped him from  
calling the cops.

and the time you wanted to  
suicide  
I was the one who gave you  
those uppers.

you insulted my father and

his wife  
and I was the one who talked  
him out of killing  
you; he was packing a  
.45 . . .

and I drove you all over the  
streets of Hollywood  
for hours that day  
until you found  
your  
car.

I'm sure  
I've done many things for  
you  
that you don't even  
remember,  
still, you never  
particularly  
liked  
me.

yet, I never asked  
anything from you  
before  
but now there's  
something  
I need.  
I've written  
a frank memoir  
about you  
and our wild times together

and I want you  
to give my publisher  
your blessing.

o.k.?

by the way, I've been  
following your  
career.  
I read your last  
book.  
it was  
all right.

Reena sends her  
love.

lemme know about  
the blessing.

and don't you worry about  
those  
photographs.

your pal,  
Benny.

## our big day at the movies

it was during the Depression and the Saturday matinee was for children and we stood in long lines a good hour before the theater even opened.

there was always a double feature but one was an adult movie which they featured first before we got to see our Buck Rogers space movie.

the movie houses in those days were imposing and clean with high curved ceilings and fancy columns and the seats were big and soft and the rugs in the aisles were red and thick and there was always an usher or usherette with a flashlight as we sat with jawbreaker candy in our mouths and waited.

the adult movie was usually pure agony and at the time there was an endless series of films featuring Fred and Ginger, we saw movie after dreadful movie of them dancing for hours, it was really terrible, headache bad.

he wore shiny black shoes and a fancy coat with long tails, the coattails flying as he pranced and tap-danced.

he would leap on tables or dance along the rail of a balcony far above the street below and he had this little fixed smile on his face, and she danced too, the blonde with curly hair, she followed him in lockstep and now and then he would toss her in the air while she maintained a pleased and adoring expression on her face.



there was always a minor plot in the movie, little bits of  
trouble would arrive and to cure every-  
thing he would begin dancing with  
her, that was the answer, the solution.  
sometimes they even kissed and we would  
all look away and groan in disgust.

he was somebody to despise with his  
sunken little face and thinning  
hair and weak chin and sharp nose, always just  
dancing, dancing, dancing  
like someone gone mad.

I had never seen any man like that living  
in our neighborhood;

our fathers would have run him off!

the lady wasn't so bad, she was  
kind of pretty but stupid to fall  
for a fellow like that.

sometimes those movies got so bad  
that just for relief a couple of the boys  
would get into a fight but the ushers  
always quickly stopped it.

yes, it was agony watching those dancers  
especially when they kissed  
but it would finally end and then there  
was a cartoon, Popeye, he'd eat a  
can of spinach and punch out some  
big ugly guy.

the ugly guy looked more like our fathers  
than that dancing freak did.

our movie would come on then and  
we'd really start to live! space  
machines, space wars, the evil  
Villain of Space and also his evil  
Sidekick and Buck Rogers would  
be captured and chained  
in a dungeon somewhere  
but somehow he always finally got  
away.

some of the space guns were  
terrific, they'd shoot rays  
and people would just vanish  
in a flash  
and the beautiful rocket ships would  
shoot through space and there were  
tremendous battles between  
Buck Rogers and the Villain  
space ships (they were terrible like  
hungry sharks and evil looking).  
there was tension, fierce tension,  
and then some new and horrible  
development would suddenly take place  
which Buck Rogers would some-  
how overcome.

Buck always survived.  
although he really had us worried  
at times—like when he was  
chained to this metal table with a  
giant circular saw creeping closer  
and closer.  
there were many such narrow  
escapes.

and then it would all be over  
and we'd have to go back to our own lives,  
to our parents, to whatever Depression dinner  
they had managed to prepare.  
but during those Saturday evenings  
after the movies  
we all felt different somehow,  
strange, a little unreal, watching  
our parents eat and converse,  
our parents,  
those people that had never experienced  
anything exciting or real,  
who seemed hardly alive,  
they were almost as boring as  
that kissing dancer with his flying  
coattails  
but not quite,  
nothing could ever be  
as bad as  
that.

## about competition

the higher you climb  
the greater the pressure.

those who manage to  
endure  
learn  
that the distance  
between the  
top and the  
bottom  
is  
obscenely  
great.

and those who  
succeed  
know  
this secret:  
there isn't  
one.

## fingernails

the nurse looked at  
my face.  
“are you a factory worker?”  
she asked.  
“no,” I said.  
“then this didn’t  
happen on the job?”  
“no,” I said, “I don’t  
work.”  
“how did this happen?”  
the nurse asked.  
“a woman,” I explained,  
“fingernails.”  
“oh,” she laughed,  
“well, fill out this  
questionnaire. the doctor will  
see you in a minute.”

there was a long list of  
strange questions:  
have you ever been in a  
mental institution?  
have you had v.d.?  
are your parents  
alive?  
do you resist  
authority?  
do you sleep on your  
back?  
are you sexually active?  
what is your favorite  
color?

if you had a chance,  
would you take  
it?

I felt that the nurse  
had possibly given me  
the wrong questionnaire.

there were a dozen more  
questions of a  
similar nature.

to all the questions  
I answered,  
I don't know.

the doctor came in,  
glanced at the sheet,  
put it down.

“you say a woman did  
this?”

“yes.”

“did she also bite you?”

“yes.”

“what do you want?”

“a tetanus shot.”

“when did you have your last  
one?”

“I don’t know.”

the doctor grabbed my  
face, started  
picking at it.

some of the scab  
came loose.  
I began  
bleeding.

“how does that feel?”  
he asked.

“just fine,” I told  
him.

“o.k.,” he said, “the  
nurse will give you a  
shot.”

he began to walk out of  
the room  
then stopped and  
turned. “by the way,  
why did the woman  
do this to you?”

“I wish I knew,” I said.  
“I really wish I knew.”

the doctor left.  
as the blood began to  
trickle down and soak into  
the collar of my  
shirt I closed my  
eyes and waited.



## iron

we all go through it, those times  
when we decide to angrily challenge everyone and  
everything.  
first we decide to get in shape.  
we start pumping iron again,  
slack muscles reluctantly responding.  
then we go back to  
hanging around the toughest  
joints,  
sitting quietly, waiting for  
trouble, daring  
trouble to show its face  
and it finally arrives in the  
form of some greasy  
lowdown  
hammerfisted  
drunk.  
a misunderstanding  
ensues  
and outside we go,  
fist against bone,  
sucking it up,  
throwing punches straight from the  
shoulder,  
grunting,  
sucking air,  
shaking off the shots,  
planting our feet,  
the drunken screaming crowd  
panting for somebody's  
anybody's  
demise.

you test the hammerfists  
one by one  
find some of them  
wanting but,  
fortunately, not  
all.

the low-life ladies love  
men who  
fight.  
and into your dim  
room  
they will now glide,  
excited by your  
dumb  
valor  
but soon  
they will begin  
to suck at your  
independence;  
with patience,  
with guile,  
they will try to claim you  
permanently as their very own  
making those  
hammerfisted drunks  
by comparison  
look  
harmless and  
pale.

then you are sitting  
around one night

in your cheap hotel  
room  
with  
whoever  
and she's speaking of her  
unhappy childhood or about  
the time she  
hitchhiked alone through  
the  
untamed Amazon  
and it hits you like a  
kick in the gut:

what am I doing to myself  
and why?

and you stop pumping  
iron and  
you dump her or better  
yet, let her dump  
you.

then you dump your misguided plan.

you abandon the proving  
ground;  
the proving ground  
proves nothing  
of importance.  
it's all just  
vanity stuffing its  
own swollen  
self.

you back away,  
regroup.

it's easy.

a month later in some  
public place  
a boor and a bull  
gives you the  
elbow, a bit of a  
shove.

he's in a hurry about  
something and  
you're slightly in his  
way.

you catch his  
eye.

"sorry, man," you  
say, "you o.k.?"

he's puzzled, can't  
make that out at  
all.

fine.

a man has to circle,  
finally come back to where  
he was.

sometimes it takes a  
while.  
other times, perhaps, it can't

be done.

but since I have  
finally accomplished this,  
become reasonable and sane again,  
the women have become  
more beautiful and the  
rooms larger and lighter,  
not that I have searched for  
either  
but they have finally  
found me.

of course, I still pump  
iron at odd and  
infrequent  
moments;  
old habits often die  
as slowly  
as do  
old men.

## extraterrestrial visitor

it was a hot afternoon in July.  
her daughter was at the swimming  
pool.  
her son was at the roller rink.  
we talked a while and then  
gradually got down to it.  
I was just  
sliding in  
when I thought I heard a  
sound.  
I pulled out and looked  
around.  
standing by the bed was this  
black kid  
about five years old.  
he was barefoot.  
“what do you want?” I  
asked him.  
“you got any empty bottles?”  
he asked.  
“no, I don’t have any  
empty bottles.”  
he left, disappointed.

“I thought the door was locked,”  
she said, “that was Clovis’s  
little boy.”  
“Clovis’s little boy?”  
“yes.”

I suppose it was.

## small talk

I left the barstool to go  
to the men's room.  
I found that  
there wasn't a urinal in  
the men's room  
just a toilet without a  
lid  
and in the toilet were  
some ugly turds.  
I kicked the flush-lever  
with my foot but the  
lever was broken.  
I urinated while looking  
away,  
zipped up,  
went to the sink: no  
soap in the dispenser.  
I turned the water  
faucet on  
and there was only  
a trickle of  
cold rusty liquid.  
there were no paper  
towels  
and a large piece of glass  
was missing  
at the corner  
of the mirror.

I left the men's room and  
walked back to my stool,  
sat down.

“you think Valenzuela’s  
going to sign with the  
Dodgers?” the barkeep  
asked me.

“doesn’t matter to me,”  
I said, “I don’t like  
baseball.”

“you don’t like baseball?”  
he asked. “are you some kind of  
queer?”

“not that I know of,” I  
told him. “give me another  
beer.”

as he bent over the cooler  
I was privileged to view his  
vast gross buttocks.  
near the crotch of his  
white pants was a large yellow  
stain.

he came up with the bottle  
flipped the lid off and  
banged the beer down  
in front of me.

“if you don’t like baseball  
what the hell do you  
do in your spare time?”  
he asked me.



“fuck,” I said.

“dreamer,” he answered  
picking up my change and  
walking to the cash  
register.

“that too,” I said.

I don't think he  
heard me.

## too sweet

I have been going to the track for so  
long that  
all the employees know  
me,  
and now with winter here  
it's dark before the last  
race.

as I walk to the parking lot  
the valet recognizes my  
slouching gait  
and before I reach him  
my car is waiting for me,  
lights on, engine warm.  
the other patrons  
(still waiting)  
ask,  
“who the hell is that  
guy?”

I slip the valet a  
tip, the size depending upon the  
luck of the  
day (and my luck has been amazingly  
good lately)  
and I then am in the machine and out on  
the street  
as the horses break  
from the gate.

I drive east down Century Blvd.  
turning on the radio to get the result of that  
last race.

at first the announcer is concerned only with  
bad weather and poor freeway  
conditions.

we are old friends: I have listened to his  
voice for decades but,  
of course, the time will finally come  
when neither one of us will need to  
clip our toenails or  
heed the complaints of our  
women any longer.

meanwhile, there is a certain rhythm  
to the essentials that now need  
attending to.

I light my cigarette  
check the dashboard  
adjust the seat and  
weave between a Volks and a Fiat.  
as flecks of rain spatter the  
windshield

I decide not to die just  
yet:  
this good life just smells too  
sweet.

## work-fuck problems

I'm in Arizona  
on a drive back from a horse stable  
to the cabin where we're staying  
air cooler blowing  
boy and dog on floor laughing.

my dirty room back home is beyond the desert  
many miles and a lifetime away  
as I sit here inside my self  
creating half-felt emotions.

the way to create art is to burn and destroy  
ordinary concepts and to substitute them  
with new truths that run down from the top of the head  
and out from the heart.

this boy isn't mine this dog isn't mine the cabin  
where I'm staying  
isn't mine  
but I own one-half of this typewriter.

after the drive back from the horse stable I find  
the lady has gone to do her laundry  
leaving me to burn and destroy  
ordinary concepts.

well, I could be working in a factory instead  
or driving a taxi  
or picking tomatoes  
if they'd hire me.

the boy walks in with a water gun,  
squirts me.

“look, kid,” I say, “I am trying to make a living. I’m not good for anything else, even picking tomatoes . . .”

the lady and I often argue about our WORK.  
how are we going to get any WORK done  
if we lie around and fuck day and night?

old Ez used to say DO YOUR WORK  
but he fucked too.  
me, I figure I can always WORK  
but I can’t always FUCK so I concentrate on FUCK  
and let the WORK come when it can.

confidence, I have that, and a bit of talent.  
but the lady is worried. she thinks I am going to  
fuck us into the poorhouse.

creation is like anything else good:  
you have to wait on it; ambition has killed more  
artists than indolence.

I am not infected with ambition  
I am quite content;  
sitting across from the horse barn at  
3 p.m. in the afternoon  
I wait for Art to create me.

it’s really pleasant

after 100 bad jobs  
15 bad woman  
and almost 60 bad years.

I listen to an opera on the radio  
while outside the Indians and Mexicans bend in the hot sun  
dreaming of wine bottles and revolution.

I too have been on their cross  
now all I need to do is record the screams in my  
memory  
well enough  
and wait for the lady to come back with her  
laundry.

## observations on music

I have sat for thousands of nights  
listening to symphony music on the radio;  
I doubt that there are many men my age  
who have listened to as much classical music  
as I have—  
even those in the profession.

I am not a musicologist  
but

I have some observations:

- 1) the same 50 or 60 classical compositions  
are played over and over  
and over again.
- 2) there has been other great music written that we  
ignore at our peril.
- 3) the second movement of most symphonies is  
only kind to insomniacs.
- 4) chamber music has every right to be energetic  
and entertaining.
- 5) very few composers know how to END their  
symphonies  
but  
most opening movements, like romance, have  
early charm.
- 6) I prefer a conductor who inserts his own  
interpretation rather than the purist who blindly follows  
the commands of the master.
- 7) of course, there are always some conductors with so much ego and  
“interpretation” that the composer  
vanishes.
- 8) music is much like fucking, but some composers can’t

climax and others climax too often, leaving themselves and the listener

jaded and spent.

9) humor is lacking in most so-called great musical compositions.

10) Bach is the hardest to play badly because he made so few spiritual mistakes.

11) almost all symphonies and operas could be shorter.

12) too much contemporary music is written from the safe haven of a university. a composer must still experience life in its raw form in order to write well.

13) music is the most passionate of the art forms; I wish I had been a musician or a composer.

14) very few writers know how to END a poem like this one

15) but I do.



## fly boy

I was 8 years old and it wasn't going  
well.  
my father was a brute and my mother  
was his assistant.  
the boys in the neighborhood  
disliked me.  
I had a hiding place.  
it was on the garage roof.  
it was very hot up there  
and I stripped down and sunbathed.  
I decided to become bronzed and  
strong.  
I did push-ups and sweated in the  
sun.  
the roof was covered with white  
pebbles which bit into my  
skin,  
but I never became bronzed, I only  
burned to an idiot  
red.  
but I continued up there on the roof.  
it was my hiding place.  
then I got it into my head that I could  
fly.  
I don't know how it started, it was  
gradual, the idea that I could  
fly.  
but as time went on the idea  
became stronger and  
stronger.  
I wasn't sure why I wanted to  
fly

but the idea of it possessed me  
more and more.  
I found myself perched on the  
edge of the roof  
several times  
but I always stepped back.  
then the afternoon came when I  
decided that I would fly.  
suddenly, I felt sure that I could.  
I was elated.  
I stepped to the edge of the roof,  
leaped out and flapped  
my arms.  
I plunged down and hit  
the ground, hard.  
when I got up I found there  
was something wrong with  
my right ankle.  
I could barely walk.  
I limped into the house, made  
it to the bedroom and got on  
my bed.  
an hour later my ankle was  
swollen,  
huge.  
I took off my shoe.

my parents arrived home at  
about this time.  
“Henry, where are you?”  
asked my father.

“I’m in here.”

they both entered, my  
father first and my mother  
behind him.

“what happened to your  
ankle, Henry?” my mother asked.

“an accident.”

“an accident?” my father asked.  
“what kind of accident?”

“I tried to fly, it didn’t work.”

“fly? how? from where?”

“from the roof of the garage.”

“so, that’s where you’ve been  
hiding lately?”

“yes.”

“do you realize this means a  
doctor bill?  
do you realize we don’t have  
any money?”

“I don’t need a doctor.”

“doctors cost money!  
get in the bathroom!”

I got up and hobbled into the  
bathroom.

“take down your pants!  
your shorts!”

I did.

“doctors cost money!”

he reached for his razor  
strop.

I felt the first bite of  
it.

a flash of light  
exploded in my  
head.

he came down with the  
strop again.

the sound of it against my  
flesh was  
horrible.

“fucking doctors!”

the strop landed  
again  
and then I knew why I had  
wanted to

fly . . . to fly  
right through the walls,  
to fly  
right out the  
window,  
to any place but  
here.

## unblinking grief

the last cigarettes are smoked, the loaves are sliced,  
and lest this be taken for wry sorrow,  
drown the spider in wine.

you are much more than simply dead:  
I am a dish for your ashes,  
I am a fist for your vanished air.

the most terrible thing about life  
is finding it gone.

## houses and dark streets

one of my greatest weaknesses is getting lost.  
I am always getting lost, I have dreams about  
getting lost, and this is why I fear going  
to foreign countries: the possibility  
of getting lost and not knowing the language.  
I was once lost in the Utah wilderness for  
nine hours but I also get lost on streets and freeways.  
you'll see me pull into a gas station and ask:  
"give me a couple of gallons of gas and  
can you tell me where I am?"

I'll find the right freeway but then drive in the  
wrong direction, drive fearfully  
for many miles along with hundreds of people who  
know exactly where they are going. I'll then  
try going in the opposite direction, give up,  
get off the freeway and  
get lost again on a dark road with no streetlights and  
silent, darkened houses:  
many dark houses and a dark street  
and no help in sight.  
I'll turn on the car radio and sit and  
listen to the friendly voices and the smooth  
music—but that only increases my madness and fear.

there hasn't been a woman I have lived with  
who hasn't received this phone call:  
"listen, baby, I'm lost, I'm in a phone  
booth and I don't know where I am!"  
"go outside," they say, "and look for a  
street sign."  
I come back after a few minutes with the information and

they calmly tell me what to do.  
I don't understand the instructions.  
then there's much screaming back and forth.  
*"it's simple!"* they scream.  
"I CAN'T DO IT!" I scream back.

once after driving around for hours I  
stopped and rented a motel room.  
luckily there was a liquor store across the  
street.  
I got two fifths of vodka and sat up watching  
tv  
pretending that life was good and that I was  
perfectly normal and in control of the situation.  
I was finally able to sleep shortly after  
opening the second bottle of vodka.

in the morning when I went to turn in my key  
I asked the lady, "by the way, could you tell me  
which way I go to get to L.A.?"

"you're in L.A.," she told me.

once leaving the Santa Anita racetrack  
one evening  
I swung off onto a side road to avoid the  
traffic and the side road started to curve sharply and I  
worried about that so I cut off onto another side road  
and I don't know when it happened but the paved  
street vanished and I was driving along on a  
small dusty road and then the road started  
*climbing* as the evening darkened into night and



I kept driving, feeling completely idiotic and  
vanquished.

I tried to turn off the steep road but each  
turn led me to a narrower road climbing even higher, and  
I thought, if I ever see my woman again I'm going  
to tell her that I'm a true subnormal,  
that I must be restricted or kept in bed or that I should  
be confined to an institution.

the road climbed higher and higher into the hills and  
then I was on top of wherever it was and there was a lovely  
little village brightly lit with neon signs and the language  
on all the signs was Chinese! and then I knew that  
I was both lost and insane!

I had no idea what it all meant, so I just kept driving  
and then looking down I saw the Pasadena freeway  
a thousand feet below: all I had to do was find  
a way to get down there.

and that was another nightmare trying to  
work my way down those steep streets lined with  
expensive dark houses.

the poor will never know how many rich Chinese hide out  
quietly in those hills.

I finally reached the freeway after another 45  
minutes and, of course, I got on in the wrong  
direction.

I don't like psychiatrists but I've often thought about  
asking one of them about all this.  
but maybe I already have the answer.

all the women I've lived with have told me the same thing:  
"you're just a fool," they say.

## the joke is on the sun

as the game continues you  
should seek to say ever more clearly  
what you truly  
believe  
even if what you truly  
believe  
turns out to be  
wrong.

it can be a hazardous  
and difficult  
task.

but  
if you can't laugh  
at the impossible odds  
we all endure as  
we seek to understand  
and know

then you will  
surely sleep  
restless  
in the  
coffin.



## part 2

if I bet on Humanity  
I'd never cash a ticket.



## like a polluted river flowing

the freeways are a psychological  
entanglement of  
warped souls,  
dying flowers in the dying hour  
of the dying day.

old cars, young drivers,  
new models driven by  
aged men, driven by  
drivers without licenses, by drunk  
drivers, by drugged drivers,  
by suicidal drivers, by super-cautious  
drivers (the worst).

drivers with minds like camels,  
drivers who piss in their seats,  
drivers who yearn to kill,  
drivers who love to gamble,  
drivers who blame everybody else,  
drivers who hate everybody,  
drivers who carry guns.

drivers who don't know what  
rearview  
mirrors are for,  
what the turn signals are for,  
drivers who drive without brakes,  
drivers who drive on bald tires.

drivers who drive slowly in the fast lane,  
drivers who hate their wives or their husbands,  
and want to make you pay for that.  
unemployed drivers, pissed.

all these represent  
humanity in general, totally enraged, demented,  
vengeful, spiteful, cheap denizens of our culture, vultures,  
jackals, sharks, suckerfish, stingrays, lice . . .

all on the freeway along with you  
tailgating,  
cutting in and out,  
cheating themselves,  
leering,  
their radios blaring the worst music ever written,  
their gas tanks nearly empty,  
engines overheating,  
minds over the next hill,  
they don't know how to drive  
or live,  
they know less than a snail crawling home.

they are what you see every day  
going from nowhere to nowhere,  
they elect presidents, procreate, decorate their  
Christmas trees.

what you see on the freeway is just what there is,  
a funeral procession of the dead,  
the greatest horror of our time in motion.

I'll see you there tomorrow!

## girlfriends

the women of the past keep  
phoning.  
there was another yesterday  
arrived from out of  
state.  
she wanted to see  
me.  
I told her  
“no.”

I don't want to see  
them,  
I won't see them.  
it would be  
awkward  
gruesome and  
useless.

I know some people who can  
watch the same movie  
more than  
once.

not me.  
once I know the  
plot  
once I know the  
ending  
whether it's happy or  
unhappy or  
just plain  
dumb,  
then



for me  
that movie is  
finished  
forever  
and that's why  
I refuse  
to let  
any of my  
old movies play  
over and over again  
for  
years.

## escape 1942

in San Francisco I watched them  
march into the  
shipyards  
with their hard hats,  
carrying their  
lunch pails.

my father had written me  
from Los Angeles: “If you  
don’t want to go to War  
then work in the  
shipyards, help your country  
and  
make some money.”

I was insane.  
I just sat in a small room and  
stared at the walls.

now, many of those  
shipyard workers  
have found that  
they were exposed to  
asbestos  
poisoning, and some of them  
are now doomed to a slow  
incurable  
death.

one thing I found out  
early  
about my father’s advice:  
ignore it

without remorse  
and you would avoid  
many of life's  
ordinary  
agonies.

there would always  
be  
enough  
of the other  
kind.

## a strange horse poem

yes, I once rode this strange horse everywhere  
from 1940 until 1950  
and his name was Nothing and we rode through New Orleans,  
St. Louis, N.Y.C., east Kansas City, you name it, you name  
the city—Atlanta, that was a real son of a bitch—and sometimes the  
horse was named Greyhound, sometimes it was named  
Greynothing, lots of young girls there, usually sitting with  
    somebody  
else, somebody dressed in a soldier's uniform looking  
damned dumb to me but damned good to everybody else.  
I could never get fucked, not that I wanted to, that was too  
    impossible,  
too far away, I just wanted to be included, to sit in a room  
    somewhere with them,  
watch the way their dresses moved as they crossed their legs,  
but I always ended up with just a job and not a woman, a tiny job  
somewhere in a ladies' dress shop or pushing dress samples or bolts  
    of cloth  
in a wooden cart through the streets of some city which name  
I have now forgotten—up long ramps into tiny dark elevators with  
    the cart  
and the samples and the bolts of cloth, and once in the elevator you  
    tugged on  
a rope threaded through wooden spools, you yanked on the rope to  
    stop and  
start the thing, and there was hardly any light, you really had to  
    look  
hard to see the numbers of the floors written on the wall in  
faded white chalk: 3, 6, 9, 10 . . . yank, stop . . . and push out to  
be greeted by easily panicked old ladies and (forgive me) a fat  
comfortable Jew with bright suspenders and an almost-  
paternal glow, he looked better and kinder than any of us.

yes, I once rode this strange horse everywhere,  
getting stuck briefly now and then in an all-yellow jail cell; the  
yellow paint flecking off the bars showing gray paint underneath,  
always  
a lidless toilet and a metal sink but the sink never worked,  
it just dripped water out of a rusty faucet and you ducked your  
head in there and sucked at the drops when you were thirsty.

I once stood in a Coca-Cola plant in Atlanta, damn it, not wanting  
to be there, not wanting to be there at all, this man telling me, “I’m  
sorry, all  
we have is one opening, \$60 a month, we’d like to  
offer you more but there’s a government freeze on wages.”

yes, I rode this strange horse everywhere and I want you  
to know that for the insane and for other certain types  
of people there are never any jobs anywhere and that even  
in good times, in time of war, that there is a line  
19 deep for the shittiest jobs in existence, and that  
the hardest job to find is as a dishwasher or a  
busboy or as a messenger boy for Western Union.

I rode this strange horse, I *was* this horse, so I want it known.  
much later I was to meet women who would tell me, “Jesus,  
Chinaski,  
why did you take all those terrible jobs when you easily  
could have . . .”

I hate those women, hate those women who say  
that, sitting in their plush offices, perhaps at some record company,  
sniffing at drugs, purses full of pills, and them acting  
ultra superior, taking me back to their apartments to fuck, and

expecting me to love and admire them when they had ridden  
*their* horse exactly nowhere.

a cheap hotel in New Orleans: getting up at 6 a.m.  
to go to work after a  
night of 3 bottles of cheap wine, going out in the  
dark, cold hall, leaving your room to look for a place to  
shit and shave, but each little toilet taken, someone  
in there shaving, and while you were  
waiting, seeing rats as large as your hand scurrying  
back and forth just before sunrise, running up and down  
along the rusty corridor, you knew then that your father was  
right, you'd always be a bum, you had no *drive*, and suddenly  
the horse was very tired so you went back to bed, \$4  
left in your wallet, enough for some wine later and some change left  
over.

I rode this strange horse and I rode this horse and I knew that  
for some there would never be good times no matter  
how good the times were, I knew that for some there  
would never be something as simple as a woman, and for some  
never a  
decent life, and finally dying like that, and maybe the  
better for it?

you don't know how faithfully I rode this horse, you don't know  
how I clashed with men who would fight to the end over a piece of  
garbage, you don't know the terrible nights,  
the night jobs of working with creatures with faces  
as blank as paper bags and you trying  
to find something, anything, behind that paper bag.

“Jesus, Chinaski, why didn’t you find a job as a writer or somethin’?” the ladies asked much later.

I checked out another job, shipping clerk, just a block from my little room in Philadelphia, next to my favorite bar; I got up early, took a bath, walked in and there were 8 others waiting ahead of me

INCLUDING

one returning W.W.II vet in full uniform with *all* his medals on.

well, they hired me because I lived just a block away and they thought I’d never be late for work (but I was always late for work).

this strange horse, you know, I’ve ridden him everywhere, I was riding him just now when I accidentally smashed the glass out of the bathroom window, my blood flung all up and down the stairway as I chased him through the dark garden, throwing rocks, blank naked under the blank moon, ripping plants up by their roots, this strange horse, you know, he won’t behave. and I remember another time blandishing about with some dopesters, “we’ll cut you in, baby, you’re the toughest guy we know. we want you in.”

but somehow that wasn’t what I wanted either.

“listen,” I told them, “I am really honored but I’m just not interested in that sort of thing.”

then I got on my strange horse and rode off, searching as ever for the grapefruit dream.

## the longest snake in the world

I parked outside, nice and shady, walked in.  
I had a 2 p.m. appointment.  
they took me right away, no waiting.  
led me to a special room.  
the doctor had a little smile.  
the nurse looked bored.

“please take off your clothes,” she said.

I stripped.

“have you ever had one of these examinations before?” the Dr.  
asked.

“no.”

“well, you’re in for a treat.”

“assume the position,” said the nurse,  
“on the chair.”

there was a specially made  
chair.

I climbed onto it.  
they strapped my wrists down.  
my ass was up in the air.

“it isn’t going to hurt,” said the  
doc. “we’re just going to take a look around  
inside of you, there’s a light on the  
end of this coil and it lets us see inside, it even allows  
us to take photos, we slide this tube right up into your  
intestine.”



is it too late to change my mind? I asked myself.

my mother-in-law had told my wife  
that she had been through the same  
procedure and that  
there was nothing to it, nothing to worry  
about.

she was always so helpful.

“now we’re going to slide this up into your  
intestine, you’ll feel a little something but  
don’t worry . . .”

“right now?”

“right now. we’re going in slowly . . . slowly . . .”

“you can breathe,” said the nurse.

“thank you.”

“this will be over so quickly you won’t even  
know we’ve done it,”  
said the doc.

“but you’ll bill me anyway . . .”

“the office will bill you. now, a little further . . .”

I imagined my white-haired mother-in-law crouched in  
the same position, trying to act brave and  
dignified.

a good girl, a good old girl.  
nobody like her.

“umm hmmm,” I heard the  
doctor say.

“keep breathing,” said the nurse.

“now we’re coming out,” said the doctor.  
“coming out now, slowly . . .”

I had noticed the long tube coiled around the  
large spool. there was a lot of intestine to examine in the  
average human  
being.

“we’re finished,” said the doctor.  
“are you relieved?”

“oh, yeah!”

the nurse handed me a handful of  
tissue.

“please clean yourself and get dressed.”

I did that.  
then I sat there waiting, staring at  
the thick black tube coiled on the big  
spool.

after a while the doctor walked back

in.

he was holding a piece of  
paper.

“is ‘Chinaski’ Polish?” he  
asked.

“it might be but I was born in  
Germany.”

“you now live in Palos Verdes?”

“San Pedro.”

“San Pedro?  
do you like it there?”

“doctor, for Christ’s sake! do I have  
cancer or not?”

“no, but you do have internal  
hemorrhoids.”

“that’s fine with me.”

“you should have them taken care  
of.  
we use rubber bands.”

“rubber bands?”

“yes, we tie them in there and when  
the bands dissolve the hemorrhoids  
are gone.”

“I don’t think I’ll bother.”

driving back home  
my ass didn’t hurt at  
all.

I punched on the radio, punched  
in the lighter.  
the lighter jumped out and I put it  
to my cigarette.  
there was a red light ahead.  
I stopped.

there were 4 cars ahead of me  
and a couple  
behind.  
and thankfully none of them knew a damned  
thing about what had happened to  
me and they never  
would.

## the niceties

I took my wife and mother-in-law  
to dinner.  
everything was all right until my mother-  
in-law asked for  
dessert.  
I called the waiter over and  
he brought her the dessert.  
for the moment everything was  
fine  
but as he stood there  
my mother-in-law looked up at  
him  
and mentioned that there was a  
different name for that same  
dessert  
back east;  
they called it something different  
in Pennsylvania.  
“oh,” said the waiter, “are you  
from Pennsylvania?”  
that made my mother-in-law smile.  
“yes,” she said, “are you?”  
the waiter said “no,” that  
he was from  
Michigan.  
my wife then said something about  
Kalamazoo.  
the waiter replied that he had a  
sister in Kalamazoo.  
“oh, do you go back there for  
the holidays?” my mother-in-law  
asked.  
the waiter said, “no,” he had

gone to Las Vegas instead.  
then my wife asked him if he had won any  
money in Las Vegas.  
and the waiter said, “well,  
actually, I did.”  
“oh, that’s fine!” said my  
mother-in-law.  
then  
somehow  
the conversation got turned  
back to Michigan, to one of the other  
cities in Michigan and  
the waiter said he had gone to  
college there.  
“oh,” said my mother-in-law,  
“one of my brothers went to that same school!”  
“oh really?” said the waiter.  
“he studied medicine there!”  
said my mother-in-law.

about that time I decided to  
tune out.  
I could hear the sounds  
but I allowed the content  
to drift over my head.  
it was very peaceful.

“HE’S ASKING YOU  
SOMETHING!” I heard my wife  
say.

I looked up.  
the waiter was asking, “can I fill

your water glass?”  
“no, thanks,” I replied.

the waiter walked off and my  
mother-in-law  
dug her spoon into the  
dessert,  
lifted a little round  
bite  
and slid it into her  
mouth.

she liked sweets and she was  
from Pennsylvania.

## time to water the plants and feed the cat

that woman took longer to dress than any woman  
I had ever known.  
one night first we made love, then looked at tv,  
then we slept.  
in the morning she was up, getting ready to  
go to work.  
I watched her through narrowed eyes; I checked her  
buttocks and legs.  
I got tired of that, it was about 7:30 a.m.  
and I went back to sleep.  
I awakened at 8:00, walked to the bathroom,  
pulled open the door.  
I screamed.  
she was standing there naked in front of the mirror.  
“Jesus Christ,” I said, “I thought you had gone to  
work!”  
“do you want to use the bathroom?” she asked.  
“no, it’s all right.”  
I went back to bed. soon she came in and kissed me  
goodbye with those big red lips and I smelled her good  
perfume.  
“phone me at work,” she said, “it always cheers me  
up.”  
after she left I went in and had a  
shower. I found a Fresca in the refrigerator  
drank that and went back to sleep.

I had a real hot dream: two women were fighting each other.  
each wanted to give it all to me.  
at first one would win for a while and  
then the other would pull her off and have her turn  
until the first one pulled her off and etc. . . .  
I awakened. I was steaming.



then I got up and took a cold bath, got dressed,  
then phoned her at work: "I gotta go home now,"  
I told her.

"oh," she said, "just stay one more night."

"no," I answered, "I can't . . ."

"why?" she asked.

"I've got to go home, water the plants, feed the  
cat," I explained.

"do that and come back. we'll have dinner out. I know  
a great place," she said, "and it's on me."

"I've got to go home," I said, "I've got to rest."

"but," she said, "you rest all the time, you're  
always in bed . . ."

"how about this weekend?" I asked. "suppose I see you  
this weekend? it's already Thursday."

"well, all right, bad boy," she answered, "this  
weekend then . . ."

I got into my Volks and drove away from  
there.

a man in his late fifties has to  
pace himself and  
some women expect love to be  
inexhaustible.

## I'm flattered

the phone rang at 7 a.m.; I was in the kitchen; I picked up the phone. "Hank?" "yes."  
"how are you doing?" "fine. I was just feeding the cats." "I'm calling you because someone just phoned me and said, 'Hank died last night,' then they hung up." "I'm all right, I'm feeding the cats." "when I heard that I almost cried, I was so shocked." "I'm flattered." "I'm calling from New York," she said, "but when I get back I'd like to come see you, I'll bring my new boyfriend." "sure, be glad to see you."

that was the end of the conversation. I hung up.

all 5 cats were now looking at me, ten eyes.

there was a sixth cat upstairs. she ate upstairs because the other cats terrorized her.

I spooned the cat food into the 5 dishes and placed them on the floor. they went for it.

every 2 or 3 years somebody tells somebody else that I have died and I then must tell that somebody else: no, no, I'm just fine.

that's as bad as some woman named Helen who told everybody that she had been married to me for several years and hated every minute of it.

and what about the time somebody who called himself Hank Chinaski went

up and down the aisles at a poetry reading shaking  
people's hands?

I take the sixth bowl of food upstairs to the cat the other  
cats terrorize and I set it down and she goes for it.

then I go back to bed with my real wife who is still  
asleep and I wonder why that person had phoned this  
other person to tell them that I was dead?

it didn't anger me. I just wondered.

I was on the minds of a lot of people. it was my own  
fault for being such an easy writer to read.

sometimes it seems that only the disabled  
and insane like to read my books,  
the ones who can't quite grasp  
Chaucer.

the sixth cat finishes its meal, jumps up on the bed,  
settles against my left flank and begins to  
lick  
lick  
lick  
lick  
lick,  
head  
bobbing  
bobbing  
bobbing.

the beginning of  
another  
perfect  
day.

## neither Shakespeare nor Mickey Spillane

turn back the years, look you're back  
at the beginning again,  
living on a candy bar a day in the cheapest  
room in town—  
trying to be a writer, not a great writer but  
somebody who gets checks for what he writes  
and lives on those checks  
and doesn't need an automobile or a  
girlfriend and needn't go to work each day,  
just be a writer, pumping it out, day after  
day, day and night, words hot on the paper,  
at 2½ cents a word, 5 cents a word, anything at all  
would be enough,  
writing stories for the pulp magazines, stories for  
the sex mags (great escapades of  
a fantastic fucker) and at the same time sending out your  
serious stuff to *Poetry, a Magazine of  
Verse*.

the candy bar was the bread and your blood  
was the wine and the long-legged, long-haired  
girls were chased away so you could get the  
Word down for the pulps, for the sex rags, for the  
*Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* and  
*Esquire* and *The New Yorker*; those cold  
fuckers who kept sending it all back while printing only  
clever careful crap.

young young young, only wanting the Word,  
going mad in the streets and in the bars,  
brutal fights, broken glass, crazy women screaming in  
your cheap room,

you a familiar guest at the drunk tank, North  
Avenue 21, Lincoln Heights.

sifting through the madness for the Word, the line,  
the way,  
hoping for a check from somewhere,  
dreaming of a letter from a great editor:  
“Chinaski, you don’t know how long we’ve been  
waiting for you!”

no chance at all.

it finally came down to less words after years of 5 short  
stories and 20 poems a week, it came down to less  
words and more wine and more crazy women and  
more broken glass and screaming, vengeful landlords  
and, of course, finally the police.

you young, taller, stronger in the mountains in your  
mind, stinking drunk, screaming  
“SCREW YOU GUYS! I’M A GENIUS!”

handcuffs snapped on in back, always too tight, the  
steel cutting into the wrists, the  
sharp brutal pain.  
“shut up, buddy, or I’ll shut you up.”

turn back the years and there you are,  
36 years ago,  
and a greater more interesting time  
was never to be had.  
you had a faith then that is missing  
now.

but the hardest thing, the current woman, slobbering  
drunk, hair in face, crying . . .

“let her go fellows, she didn’t do anything,  
you don’t want her,  
she was just along for the ride.”

“god damn you, shut up!” from the cop,  
shoving you through the door, down the  
stairway fast  
where it took all your effort not to fall  
headlong, which was what he  
wanted, hands cuffed behind you, you would  
be unable to break the fall . . .

you broke into song then:  
“*My Heart Is a Hobo* . . .”

and you heard the angry cop curse in the  
dark  
as you were led away.

all you wanted was 2½ or 5 cents a  
word.  
son of a bitch, you ached so hard to be a writer  
of any kind.

why didn’t they understand?

## show business

Marty, listen to me, *all* the stars are  
gonna be there!  
I know there's no money in it for you!  
but it's good public relations!  
the public LOVES these AIDS  
BENEFITS, Marty!  
it lets them know you got  
heart, it lets them know you  
got soul!  
ask any P.R. man!  
*they've* all got their clients doing  
it!  
look at Sammy D.! he's your  
buddy, you think he gives a FUCK  
if somebody dies of AIDS?  
he knows the payoff will come  
later  
when he's doing his next big gig!  
get with it, Marty!  
everybody's doing it!  
watch out or the public is going  
to ask, "how come Marty Mellon  
ain't appeared at no AIDS  
BENEFITS?"  
that's DEATH, Marty!  
for YOU!  
GOT IT?  
HUH?  
ATTA BABY!  
YOU JUST ABOUT SCARED THE  
SHIT OUT OF ME!  
now, the next one is set for



June 20th, I'll put you down for  
that, every asshole in town is gonna  
be there . . .

pop!

this idiot's wounded flower  
dangles peacefully,  
but boy, what a war!  
just like all the other wars  
but each new one seems more and more  
the same as the one before!  
nothing is very new  
as I sit here arranging  
these impossible words,  
sifting out all the impossibilities.  
this is a *denouement*, baby, because  
you told me that you were different  
than the others  
but how different?  
you mean you don't piss behind  
boulevard signboards?  
I haven't forgotten to water the little  
plants around the doorway  
and I'm left here alone with our cats, three of  
them, six eyes looking, they are  
walking bellies, I feed them,  
drink, type about all this,  
there can be nothing great said  
here, nothing even decent, nothing even  
understandable, and I'm just now pulling  
another wine cork with my  
yellow corkscrew, and that's where  
I got this title.

## the interview

I read it all.  
the poet went on and on  
talking about the value of  
workshops.  
this poet taught at a  
university.  
believed in teaching poets in  
prison,  
and teaching poets in the schools,  
high schools,  
reading his poems there,  
bringing the word.  
this poet had studied under  
C. and R. and O.  
yes, this poet always carried  
a notebook  
to capture impressions  
at odd moments  
else they would be forgotten.  
yes, this poet revised his stuff  
many times.  
as much as six revisions per  
poem.  
this poet had been awarded  
grants and  
prizes.  
during dry periods this poet hiked  
or rode his bicycle.  
the masses, said this poet,  
were hungry for poetry.  
the reason the books didn't  
sell was not that poetry itself  
was insufficient but that the

masses were sadly unaware of  
it.

it was our duty to awaken the  
people he said, it was our responsi-  
bility, etc.

I dropped the magazine to the  
floor, got up, walked to the  
bathroom  
and had one of my best  
bowel movements in  
several years.

## re-union

when you left I thought you'd never  
return and finally I got to feeling good  
about that.

now it's starting all over  
again

right here  
right now.

I watch  
the pyramids stand by quietly as the monkey eats his  
fleas.

somehow  
once again  
we seem to be as  
content as a package of  
peanuts

bleached by the sun  
and then

caught like  
a  
ringing bell.

## Genius unfettered

Mr. Colskey studied under Bartmouth at  
the Zale Institute,  
then studied with the legendary  
Randall Steel at  
Milestone.  
he was assistant conductor under  
Frank Zellenstein  
for 11 years  
with the Brighton-on-Hudson  
Orchestra.  
when Mr. Zellenstein retired in  
1955  
Mr. Colskey  
took over the baton.  
besides his directorial duties  
Mr. Colskey has found time  
for his own  
compositions,  
the best known being  
his Symphony in Two Movements,  
*The Coffin, the Burial,*  
a lengthy work of almost total  
silence.  
other works are his piano  
sonata,  
*One for Grandma's Canary,*  
and his work for solo flute,  
*Canard Base.*  
there is also his  
daring operatic overture,  
*Photo of a Dog's Tail*  
*Wagging.*

Mr. Colskey has delighted  
audiences for half-a-  
century now.  
eccentric in approach and  
manner,  
difficult, reproachful,  
demanding, errant at times,  
still, he has left his mark  
on the world of  
music.  
seven times married  
and with some 14 children  
he still presents  
an ominous, stirring  
and heroic  
figure upon the  
podium.

tonight Mr. Colskey is  
to present the  
World Premiere  
of his tone poem,  
*Up Your Aspen  
Dream.*

parts of this introspective  
score have previously appeared  
in Mr. Colskey's only  
Cello Concerto,  
*Angels Are Green.*

Mr. Colskey is now appearing  
on stage  
carrying his baton  
to the applause of the  
audience  
here in  
Sibling Hall.

now he is facing forward,  
smiling,  
and he has taken out his  
penis and is  
urinating!  
the audience is  
silent and frankly  
stunned!

he finishes, zips  
up, then walks off  
stage.

we are afraid  
Mr. Colskey has dealt  
his career  
a final, fateful  
blow

as the orchestra now  
strikes up and begins  
to play  
Anton Bruckner's



*Symphony #6*  
*in A Major.*  
without Mr.  
Colskey.

## Bob

the other day we were in a  
bookstore in the mall  
and my woman said, “look, there’s  
Bob!”

“I don’t know him,” I said.

“we had dinner with him  
not too long ago,” she said.

“all right,” I said, “let’s get  
out of here.”

Bob was a clerk in the store  
and his back was to us.

my woman yelled, “hello, Bob!”

Bob turned and smiled, waved.  
my woman waved back.  
I nodded at Bob, a very  
delicate blushing fellow.  
(Bob, that is.)

outside my woman asked, “don’t you  
remember him?”

“no.”

“he came over with Ella. re-  
member Ella?”

“no.”

my woman remembers everything.

I don't understand it, although  
I suppose it's polite  
to remember names and faces  
I just can't do it  
I don't want to carry all those  
Bobs and Ellas and Jacks and Marions  
and Darlenes around in my mind. eating and  
drinking with them is difficult en-  
ough.  
to attempt to recall them at will  
is an affront to my well-  
being.

that they remember me is  
bad enough.

## bearclaw morning

I was sitting at a café counter  
having a couple of eggs  
while waiting for the locksmith  
to fix the lock on the door  
of my car.

the day before  
at the racetrack parking lot  
someone had jimmed open the door  
and ripped out the radio and  
the stereo.

I didn't miss the radio and  
the stereo  
but I didn't like  
the big hole in the dash  
with all the wires  
sticking out  
like spaghetti.

locks never stop the pros  
from getting in, but anyhow  
as I was eating  
a little dark-skinned man  
in his late fifties  
sat down next to me and  
ordered a bearclaw and a  
coffee.

he looked over at me.  
“the employment office is  
closed,” he said.

“yeah?”

“yeah, it’s that damn Reagan.  
it’s closed down. you gotta go  
all the way to Wilmington  
now. it’s a dirty town.  
they don’t even use  
street sweepers.”

“gimme another coffee, please,”  
I told the waitress.

“sure, honey,” she said  
bringing the pot, “I guess you’re  
out of cream?”

“don’t be funny,” I  
said.

“you gonna go to Wilmington?” the  
little guy asked me.

“my car’s in for repairs,”  
I said.

“how ya gonna get a job?” he asked.  
“ya gotta go all the way to Wilmington.”

“I don’t need a job,” I said.

I was watching the two cooks, there  
was a new cook and an old cook and the

new cook had an order for a ham sandwich and he started to slice into the baked ham.

the old cook grabbed his arm: “no, no . . .” he reached under the counter and came up with a pressed ham patty: “give ’em this.”

“you look like you need a job,”  
the little man said.

“I’m a gambler,”  
I said.

“what?”

“horses, mainly. but I also beat the point spread, basketball and football. I loaded up on Tyson in the big fight and I pimp in Gardena a little bit.”

“how do you learn all that stuff?”  
he asked.

I just smiled at him  
picked my bill up and laid the tip  
down.

as I stood at the counter paying  
my bill

I flashed some green and  
stuck a toothpick  
into my mouth.

I picked up my change and when  
I put my wallet away  
I didn't stick it  
into a rear pocket but  
into the left front pocket,  
carefully.

as I opened the door  
two little old white-haired ladies  
entered.

“good morning, girls,” I said in a  
soothing voice.

outside  
I stood a moment  
quietly in the sun  
and stretched  
not thinking about a god-  
damned thing.

then I decided that I'd  
better go see about the  
door lock on the driver's  
side.

but first I stretched again  
leisurely  
in the sun

while glancing down at a  
paper rack full of *The  
Wall Street Journal*.

refreshed, I turned and  
started walking back to  
the locksmith's place.



## death and transfiguration

left the place with the girlfriend screaming.  
then on the freeway  
I look back and there he is:  
a cop on a bike with his red lights  
flashing.  
I pull over, he writes me up, then  
I continue,  
make the track,  
lose the first 8 races,  
make my last  
bet and leave,  
drive back on in,  
pull into the driveway.  
there's the girlfriend standing in the  
doorway.  
she waves, smiles  
like nothing happened.  
I get out of the car, limp slowly toward the  
door.  
I'll phone to see  
how I did in the  
9th.

## warriors in this place

I see a brutal and vapid face—  
it's astonishing!  
look, it's on a head and the head is  
attached to a body and now the body  
is walking out of the  
room.

at least the face is gone now and I pick  
up my chopsticks and contemplate:  
why did that man bother me  
so?  
is it that I feel the waste of centuries?  
the waste of nothing having gone forward?  
or does the son of a bitch just make me  
sick for reasons I don't understand?

I need more balance, a more distanced  
perspective.  
I should accept what is.  
nightmares are a part of existence.

he comes back into the restaurant,  
walks behind me down to the end of the  
room, reaches his table,  
stops.  
he looks back at me.

it's a stare-down.  
we are locked in a stare-down.  
finally a friend says something to him and  
he pulls out his chair and sits  
down.  
enemies forever have met in a

sushi bar.

I wish for his death as he wishes for  
mine.

I take my chopsticks,  
smile,  
and pick up a  
California roll.

## a sickness?

yes, I'm a Romantic, overly sentimental,  
something of a hero worshiper,  
and I do  
not apologize for this.  
instead, I revere Hemingway,  
at the end of his endurance,  
sticking the  
barrel of the gun into his trembling  
mouth;  
and I think  
of Van Gogh slicing off part of his ear  
for a whore  
and then blasting  
himself away in the  
cornfield;  
then there was Chatterton drinking rat  
poison (an extremely painful way to die  
even if you are a  
plagiarist);  
and Ezra Pound dragged through  
the dusty streets of Italy in a cage  
and later confined to a  
madhouse;  
Celine robbed, hooted at, tormented by  
the French;  
Fitzgerald who finally quit drinking only to drop dead  
soon thereafter;  
Mozart in a pauper's grave;  
Beethoven deaf;  
Bierce vanishing into the wastelands of Mexico;  
Hart Crane leaping over the ship's rail and  
into the propeller;  
Tolstoy accepting Christ and giving all his

possessions to the  
poor;  
T. Lautrec  
with his short, deformed  
body  
and perfectly developed  
spirit,  
drawing everything he  
saw  
and more;  
D. H. Lawrence  
dying of TB  
and preparing his own Ship of Death  
while writing his  
last  
great poems;  
Li Po  
setting *his* poems  
on fire  
and sailing them down the  
river;  
Sherwood Anderson dying  
of peritonitis  
after swallowing a  
toothpick  
(he was at a party  
drinking  
martinis  
when  
the olive went in,  
toothpick and  
all);

Wilfred Owens killed  
in the first Great War  
while  
saving the world for  
Democracy;  
Socrates drinking  
hemlock with a  
smile;  
Nietzsche gone mad;  
De Quincey addicted to opium;  
Dostoevsky standing blindfolded before a  
firing squad;  
Hamsun eating his own  
flesh;  
Harry Crosby committing  
suicide hand in hand with his  
whore;  
Tchaikovsky trying to  
evade his homosexuality  
by marrying a female  
opera star;  
Henry Miller, in his old  
age, obsessed with  
young Oriental  
girls;  
John Dos Passos going  
from fervent left-winger  
to ultraconservative  
Republican;  
Aldous Huxley taking  
visionary  
drugs and

reaping imaginary  
riches;  
Brahms in his youth,  
working on ways  
to build a powerful  
body  
because he felt that  
the mind  
was not  
enough;  
Villon barred from Paris,  
not for his ideas  
but rather because he was a  
thief;  
Thomas Wolfe who felt he couldn't  
go home again  
until  
he was  
famous;  
and Faulkner:  
when he got his morning mail,  
he'd hold the envelope up  
to the light  
and if he couldn't see  
a check in there  
he'd throw it  
away;  
William Burroughs who shot and  
killed his  
wife  
(he missed the apple  
perched

on her  
head);  
Norman Mailer knifing *his*  
wife; no apple  
involved;  
Salinger not believing  
the world was worth writing  
for;  
Jean Julius Christian Sibelius,  
a proud and beautiful man  
composer of powerful music  
who after his 40th year  
went into hiding and was seldom  
seen  
again;  
nobody is sure who  
Shakespeare  
was;  
nightlife killed Truman  
Capote;  
Allen Ginsberg becoming a  
college  
professor;  
William Saroyan marrying the  
same woman twice  
(but  
by then  
he wasn't going anywhere  
anyhow);  
John Fante being sliced away  
bit by bit  
by the surgeon's knife



before my very  
eyes;  
Robinson Jeffers  
(the proudest poet of them all)  
writing  
begging letters to those in power.

of course, there's more  
to tell  
and I could go  
on and on  
but even I  
(the Romantic)  
begin to  
tire.

still, these men and women  
—past and present—  
have created and are creating  
new worlds for  
the rest of us,  
despite the fire and despite the ice,  
despite the  
hostility of governments,  
despite the ingrown distrust of the masses,  
only to die  
singly  
and usually  
alone.

you've got to admire them all  
for the courage,  
for the effort,

for their best and at their  
worst.

some gang!  
they are a source of light!  
they are a source of joy!

all of them  
heroes you can be  
grateful for  
and admire from afar  
as you wake up  
from your ordinary dreams  
each morning.

## a fine night

there's one, she's walking along looking  
straight ahead, sticking out her thumb,  
she's fat, no, I won't want it, let her  
be somebody else's trouble.  
in my rearview mirror I see somebody else pull  
over and she climbs in.

VIKING MOTEL, Vacancy, I park, a  
woman talks to me through protective glass:  
\$28.  
fine.  
it comes to \$30.10 with tax.

room 12, on the end.  
I go in. box of a room, lumpy  
double bed, torn blue bed-  
spread, I yank it to the floor.

the tv is black-and-white,  
12 inch, I turn it on, turn it  
around to face the wall.

I strip down, do some shadow  
boxing, decide to shower:  
2 tiny pieces of soap and  
the shower head is built for  
a guy 4 feet tall.  
I gyrate about, thinking,  
the only meaningful thing about  
the South is that they lost  
the Civil War and still can't  
accept it.

I leave the shower, go  
to bed and lie there  
wet.

I pick up the phone, dial a  
number.  
“where are you?” she asks.  
“when you get personal you get  
overbearing,” I tell her.  
I hang up.

I find a matchbook in the  
ashtray. it tells me that  
I am close to the beaches  
and

4 MILES SOUTH OF  
LOS ANGELES AIRPORT

I could fly to Peru.  
I could fly to China.

I sit up on the edge of  
the bed  
dig the corkscrew  
out of the paper bag  
along with the first bottle  
of *petite sirab*  
unpeel a long strip of red  
cellophane  
twist corkscrew into cork  
yank it out.

sometimes a man has to take refuge in  
a motel room  
to save his  
god-damned soul.

## riots

I've watched this city burn twice  
in my lifetime  
and the most notable event  
was the reaction of the  
politicians in the  
aftermath  
as they  
proclaimed the injustice of  
the system  
and demanded a new  
deal for the hapless and the  
poor.

nothing was corrected last  
time.  
nothing will be changed this  
time.

the poor will remain poor.  
the unemployed will remain  
so.  
the homeless will remain  
homeless

and the politicians,  
fat upon the land, will thrive  
forever.

## Venice Beach

the lost and the damned  
the wounded and the intellectual  
the boozed and the debauched  
the negative and the  
uninspired  
and the police  
and the police  
and the police.

## the con job

the ground war began today  
at dawn  
in a desert land  
far from here.  
the U.S. ground troops were  
largely  
made up of  
Blacks, Mexicans and poor  
whites  
most of whom had joined  
the military  
because it was the only job  
they could find.

the ground war began today  
at dawn  
in a desert land  
far from here  
and the Blacks, Mexicans  
and poor whites  
were sent there  
to fight and win  
as on tv  
and on the radio  
the fat white rich newscasters  
first told us all about  
it  
and then the fat rich white  
analysts  
told us  
why  
again  
and again



and again  
on almost every  
tv and radio station  
almost every minute  
day and night  
because  
the Blacks, Mexicans  
and poor whites  
were sent there  
to fight and win  
at dawn  
in a desert land  
far enough away from  
here.

## looking back

now  
I can't believe myself then:  
in the bars  
attempting to pick up  
the lowest  
women:  
sagging stockings,  
rouged cheeks,  
deathly mascara,  
yellow-toothed,  
rat-eyed,  
bellowing hyena  
laughter  
and when I was  
successful  
(peacock proud)  
I was Attila,  
I was Alexander the  
Great,  
I was the toughest  
roughest guy in  
town—  
Bogart, Cagney,  
Gable, all rolled up into  
one.

and worse,  
I can't understand myself then:  
continually choosing the biggest  
meanest bastard in the bar  
to come and fight  
in the alley,  
to get myself clubbed by

blows I didn't  
see coming.  
my brain jumping inside  
my skull,  
seeing shots of  
color, flashes of  
light, feeling my  
mouth fill with blood,  
sensing my body  
sprawled  
on the pavement,  
only to get up and rush  
forward again with my  
tiny hands.  
there was many a  
fight when I hardly  
landed a  
punch.  
I was a laugh a  
minute and the crowd  
had all  
night  
to watch.  
I'd get my beating  
and they'd get their  
jollies.

my face was never completely healed.  
I walked around  
with a fat  
lip, a black  
eye, a nose that

hurt.  
I developed bone-  
spurs on my  
knees from falling so  
hard  
and so often.  
yet a couple of nights  
later  
I'd be looking  
for a new  
meaner  
bastard  
to challenge.

but even harder to believe  
now  
was when finally  
through some unexpected  
stroke of luck  
I did occasionally win  
one  
I was accorded no  
cheers, no  
accolades.  
my stripe, my function  
in that strange little world  
was to  
lose.  
I was the guy from out of  
town  
and not even of the  
neighborhood.

the strangest most hateful  
nights were after I had finally  
won,  
sitting alone at the end  
of the bar  
as that gang laughed and  
talked it up  
as if I wasn't even  
there.

but when I lost they loved me  
and the drinks came  
all night  
long.

so when I won I lost  
and when I lost I  
won.

and  
looking back  
it is hard for me to believe  
some of the women  
I ended up  
shacking with.  
they all had good bodies,  
great legs,  
but the faces!  
the faces were faces from  
hell!  
they were all fair in bed  
(in spite of rather a general  
indifference to sex)

but  
they had ways of flattering  
me.  
I was younger  
than they were  
and  
more open to the  
dream.

but Christ, they *were* good at  
locating my wallet,  
after a day or two  
or a week or two  
they'd vanish  
with all my money  
to leave me  
scrabbling for rent,  
food, sanity and that  
infamous  
lost  
dream.

only to reappear again!  
knocking on my 3 a.m.  
door  
as if nothing had  
happened:

“hi! how've you been?”

back from robbing some  
other poor son of a  
bitch.

and worse,  
I'd let them back in,  
liking the look of the leg,  
the general madness of it  
all,  
to drink with them then,  
to hear their new sad  
stories,  
to let the dream seep  
back in . . .  
after all, where was I to find  
a real lady?  
down at the public library?  
or at the opera house?

“come on in, baby, show me  
some leg and let's hear  
your story.  
and come on, have a  
drink!”

I had no plans.  
I had no idea of what I was  
doing,  
where I was  
going,  
the world was a strange and  
oppressive  
place.  
a man had to have guts  
to shove on through.  
everybody was so sad,

defeated,  
subservient.

“tell me all about it, baby!”

but in spite of everything  
I liked myself with my tiny  
hands and my pockmarked  
monkey face.

I liked sitting in my  
shorts and my undershirt,  
the undershirt torn and  
dirty and full of cigarette  
burns and wine stains.

I had muscular arms  
and great powerful legs  
and I loved to walk the rug  
with my whore watching  
while I spouted  
inaneities and  
insanities.

I was hot stuff.  
I was young stuff.  
I was a fool  
and I loved playing the  
fool.

“o.k., baby show me  
more leg!  
more!  
your talk bores me!



lift your skirt higher!  
hold it there!  
not too high!  
I don't want to see  
everything!  
let me imagine it!"

looking back, it all couldn't have been much  
better.

what a lovely  
fucking  
time  
it was.

## the love poems of Catullus

she read his poems  
she read them to the men waiting in her bed  
then tore them up  
laughing  
and fell on the bed  
opening her legs to the nearest convenient  
cock.

but Catullus continued to write love  
poems to her  
as she fucked slaves in back  
alleys, and  
when they were together  
she robbed him while he was  
drunk,  
mocked his verse and his  
love,  
pissed on his  
floor.

Catullus who  
otherwise  
wrote brilliant  
poems  
faltered under the spell of  
this wench  
who  
it is said  
as she grew old  
fled from him  
begat a new life upon a far isle  
where she ended up a  
suicide.

Catullus was like  
most poets:  
I understand  
and forgive as I  
re-read him:  
he knew  
as death approached  
that it's  
better to start out with a  
strumpet than to end up  
with one.

## dream girl

when the sun comes up in the morning  
(I sleep on my belly so it's always from my left)  
I awaken to  
that lovely golden light  
and  
I'm usually alone  
and I sometimes (but not always) wonder why the most  
beautiful woman in the world is not sleeping there next to  
me?  
I deserve her, I think, I deserve  
her.

then I get up  
go to the bathroom  
splash water on my face

look into the  
mirror

shudder a bit  
in  
disbelief

then

go sit down on  
the ivory  
stool

let it all  
go

except for the  
reality

which

no amount  
of  
efficient  
modern  
plumbing  
can

whirl  
away.

## empties

we emptied wine bottles as if they were  
thimbles  
and our 4 a.m. arguments had caused us to be evicted from  
apartments all over the city  
but our biggest problem was the disposal of all the  
empties.  
we were afraid the landlord would be tipped off by his  
trash cans, that he'd realize there were two serious drunks  
among his tenants  
so we snuck some of the empties into neighborhood  
trash cans  
but we still had many leftovers  
which we hid in our room  
for weeks on end  
in cartons and bags until we were overwhelmed by  
the accumulation.  
finally  
upon a given night  
after drinking for a few hours  
we'd sneak the bags and boxes  
down the back stairway and  
into our old car  
(luckily, a sedan)  
and we'd get in  
the floor in back  
stacked high with  
bag and box upon bag and box  
and the back seat also jammed with  
boxes and sacks of empties  
rising up against the windows  
so that visibility was almost  
impossible  
while in front

at our feet sat the last of  
the boxes and bags of  
empties  
where they shifted and slid  
getting in the way as I worked the  
clutch, the brake, the gearshift  
while, of course, between us, we also carefully preserved  
a couple of *fulls*  
at the ready.  
such a clinking and clanking of empties as we drove  
in the moonlight!  
driving slowly up into the Baldwin  
Hills  
we were  
terrified that the police might stop  
us  
and insist that we spend  
at least a couple of days in  
jail;  
our journey took us over  
unpaved roads  
in that old car  
we knew might quit at any  
moment;  
afraid to be noticed  
I'd cut the headlights  
and drive in the moonlight  
the forest of silent oil wells  
indifferent to us  
and at last  
we'd get to where the road was  
both rocky *and* muddy

and I'd say,  
"THIS IS IT!"  
then  
as if the very searchlight of  
God was focused on me  
I'd leap out and begin throwing  
sacks and boxes of empties into the  
throbbing dark,  
over the nearest cliff  
hearing them tumble and crash  
along with the sound of breaking glass.  
I'd grab faster and faster  
sweating, dizzy and sick as  
I'd hurl the empties into the empty  
night  
until the car was  
cleaned out.  
then  
she would look at  
me and say,  
"Jesus Christ, did we drink all  
*that?*"  
and I'd smile  
get in  
start the car  
and it felt so good to be rid of  
all those empties!  
all that baggage!  
and I'd disengage the gears  
to save on fuel  
and we'd glide down out of the  
hills



unnoticed by everything and  
everyone.  
she'd hand me a fresh  
hit  
and I'd pass it back  
and  
she'd say,  
“geez, don't you feel  
better?”  
and I'd answer, “yeah, how much  
we got left?”  
she'd hold up the  
bottle. “enough to get us  
home.”

it was a hollow, temporary victory that  
only someone like us could  
appreciate.  
“we got another bottle at the  
apartment?” I'd ask.  
“maybe 2, maybe 3,” she'd  
reply,  
and we'd head back to our  
place  
(a place we now hoped would remain ours  
for a while).  
we'd done what we could to  
preserve our status as decent  
sober citizens  
and although we knew that time was always  
running out on us  
in every way

we tried our best to preserve that illusion  
because we knew no one else would ever  
understand the way we really were, nor did we  
expect them  
to.

## the landlady

all you got living above you is a boy.  
the room is \$100 and you pay the  
utilities. Connie want a  
cookie? don't she have a nice  
face? you're not afraid of dogs, are  
you? I thought not. you  
been living very long in this  
neighborhood? I been here since  
1922. I remember President Harding, his  
big hat. a real  
gentleman. you know Ernie Bowers? he's been  
living in this neighborhood all his  
life!  
you got two couches.  
you get a visitor and  
she can sleep on one couch and  
you on the  
other. they unfold into  
beds. there's a kitchen and your own  
toilet. all you got living above you is a  
young boy, that's all.  
he comes home from work  
listens to a little music and then  
goes out and eats. Connie, do you want a  
cookie? Connie, have a cookie!  
she's *so* sweet. she wakes me every morning  
to go out and do her shame. she wakes me with  
her paw. *so* sweet. have a cookie,  
Connie. old Ernie Bowers . . . he's 82, he talks mainly  
to himself now, I saw him on the corner  
yesterday. did you know he used to double for  
Rudolph Valentino in the movies? and he's also a mimic.  
he used to look just like

Rudy. he carries these old photos of  
himself to prove it. he's a real good mimic too.  
you ought to see him  
do Dean Martin . . .

## about the mail

I get more and more letters  
and they generally fall into one of two  
camps:

one, from ladies who say they like my  
writing,  
and then they tell me the bare facts  
of their life and they are always careful to  
mention their *age*, usually anywhere from  
18 to 35.

one lady even sent me the key to her  
house  
but since it was in Australia  
I threw it  
away.

one 18-year-old keeps writing, wondering why  
I don't answer.  
she says, "are you afraid to  
fuck me?"

that's not what I'm afraid  
of.

the second kind of letter comes from  
men, men who are going crazy on the  
job, or going crazy because of a wife or girlfriend  
or family and  
some of the men might actually be crazy, because  
they write from  
madhouses, while many others write from  
jail.

most infer that my books have helped them  
get through some tough times, at least  
for the moment.

frankly, I always thought that  
my writing was for the purpose of  
keeping *me* from going  
under

but it appears I've helped any number  
of others.

well, being helped happened to  
me too:

there was  
Celine  
Dostoevsky  
Fante  
early Saroyan  
Turgenev  
Gorky  
Sherwood Anderson  
Robinson Jeffers  
e. e. cummings  
Blake  
Lawrence  
and  
many  
others

and  
if I can pass some courage on

to my correspondents

then the royalties

the luck

the satisfaction

and the

honor

are

legitimately

mine

in that

order.

## have you ever pulled a lion's tail?

I knew a girl in a brownstone  
and I was a warehouseman  
with a forehead pulled down over  
my eyes  
trying to figure out where I was at.

and one night a lion got loose  
and we were in the park  
and I saw it first  
and I saw it later,  
looking back over my shoulder,  
I saw it mauling my poor girl,  
and then I felt bad  
and ran back  
and pulled at its tail  
and threw rocks  
until a cop came up and shot  
the thing,  
and she was a shock of blood,  
didn't know who I was  
and they put her in an ambulance  
and then she was gone.

I walked down to the center of town  
to the penny arcade  
and I played all the games,  
the basketball game, the golf game,  
the soccer game, saw an old  
movie, tested my strength,  
and then I phoned the hospital  
and she was still alive,  
but no visitors,  
and I went home and there was



half a 5th left  
and I opened a can of roastbeef hash  
and some pickled beets,  
but I couldn't get over how funny  
his tail felt.  
have you ever pulled a lion's tail?

I only ate half the hash  
and went to bed and worked on the 5th.  
it was Sunday night and I kept thinking  
I probably would have been in her by now  
and now maybe she won't look so good  
if she makes it.

why don't they leave the lions in Africa?  
you can't blame the lions.

I finished the 5th, and phoned Vicky.  
she was from someplace in New Hampshire,  
a little tall  
with a squint eye,  
but what did it matter?  
the evening  
was still  
young.

## who needs it?

see this poem?  
it was  
written without drinking.  
I don't need to drink  
to write.  
I can write without  
drinking.  
my wife says I can.  
I say that maybe I can.  
I'm not drinking  
and I'm writing.  
see this poem?  
it was  
written without drinking.  
who needs a drink now?  
  
probably the reader.

## tight black pants

she was a schoolteacher and she wore tight black pants  
and she sat over by the fire  
and talked about how interesting children were,  
how she liked her job with the little ones;  
I had brought a 6-pack and Harry went for another one;  
she was one of Harry's girls, she was 38,  
and then she went for a 6-pack and came back  
and once while Harry was out in the kitchen  
I kissed her on the way to the crapper.  
I came back and we talked some more  
and then I decided I had better leave her with Harry,  
and I got out, pulled out of the driveway,  
and there was Harry in there with her  
down by the seashore  
playing Shostakovich's 5th symphony  
and I was out of it,  
out of trouble, uninvolved,  
she had her little ones and she had Harry and Harry had  
her, and somehow  
I felt I was the only winner  
driving down Pico Blvd.  
past a McDonald's  
it was a quiet easy night,  
controlled, definite and meaningful.  
poor Harry would get all that ass;  
the only thing that would save him now was for California  
to fall into the  
ocean.

## the weirdest day

I went to the baseball game  
with Jane.  
we each had a bottle with us  
and were also drinking beer  
on the side.  
it was back in the old days when the  
L.A. Angels played at  
Wrigley Field.  
anyhow, we got to  
arguing  
and Jane left.  
I never stop women when they  
want to  
leave.  
I figure if they are dumb enough  
to leave me  
they don't deserve  
me.

anyhow, I kept drinking and  
got to feeling  
rancorous.  
before the pitcher threw each  
ball  
I would shout what  
I thought was  
going to happen.  
I would either yell  
"STRIKE!" or  
"BALL!" or  
"IT'S A HIT!"  
and I was a big guy

and young and mean  
so nobody  
said anything.

the strangest thing was that  
I called everything correctly.  
I seemed to know  
exactly what was going to  
happen before it  
happened.  
I was so pissed off at  
Jane that it had made me  
clairvoyant.

“this guy’s good,”  
I heard somebody  
say.

“I can’t believe it,”  
somebody else  
said.

I was right  
every time for  
the first 3  
innings.  
I don’t know how  
many calls I  
made,  
maybe between  
50 or 60 in a  
row.

then I got tired of  
it all  
and decided to  
leave.

I walked out to the  
parking lot and  
the car was  
gone.  
the bitch had  
taken the  
car.  
I had to get a  
cab.

I sat in the back seat  
of the cab and  
finished the pint of  
whiskey.

for some reason  
that really  
pissed me off.

when I got back to  
the apartment Jane was  
passed out on the  
bed.

I shook her.

“hey, bitch!”

“uh,” she said,  
“uh . . .”

“listen, I called every  
pitch correctly before it  
happened!”

“uh . . . ?”

“I called them right  
52 times in a  
row!”

“uh . . . ?”

her head rolled  
over to  
one side.  
within 5 seconds  
she was  
snoring.

I went to the  
kitchen and got a  
beer.  
I sat in a chair  
and looked at her  
snoring on the bed  
and drank the  
beer.

then I got up and

got a glass of wine  
and came back.

I sat in that chair  
drinking until it  
got dark.

Jane kept snoring and  
I kept drinking.

I'd called them right,  
I'd called all those  
plays  
right.

I was young and I was  
mean and I was  
tough and now I had  
something else going  
too, something wonderful and  
mysterious.

I deserved a younger  
woman!  
I deserved more  
money!  
I deserved a better  
life!  
there was nobody  
quite as unique as I  
was!

then I gave it up



and went to bed  
with all my clothes  
on.

## burning bright

I read about him in the sports pages,  
he's just a kid, he's still in high school,  
he's never fought anything but four rounders,  
8 four rounders in which he K.O.'d  
each one of his 8 opponents  
in the first minute of the first  
round.

they put him on the card every two weeks  
or so  
and he waits in his dressing room,  
warming up,  
then they come in  
each time  
and tell him the same thing:  
the other guy failed to show.

he can't even get anybody to spar with him  
down at the gym.

"I'll put him in a six rounder!  
I'll put him in a ten rounder!" says his  
promoter.

"not enough experience," says his  
father, who is his manager.

it's hell when you're too good  
to make money.

another young fighter called Van Gogh  
found that out.

## the death of a hero

I was young when my hero was young  
the only difference being that  
he quickly became famous  
and soon I saw his photograph  
in the newspaper  
in nightclubs with starlets  
and the next thing I knew there was a  
war  
and he was in uniform  
in full garb  
but I remembered that in his  
books  
he had said that he would never ever  
go to war.

well, most of us have  
heroes  
and we don't want them  
to be  
ordinary,  
we want them to be dangerous  
and damned well original  
and never given over to  
any kind or sort of  
compromise.

I couldn't understand  
how a man could write so  
defiantly and clearly  
and then proceed to do the  
opposite.  
I thought that  
what you wrote

was from your  
soul  
and that  
such a final  
cop-out  
by my hero  
was impossible.

so I turned on the bastard  
and so did the  
public—we were not interested  
in his books about  
army life.

afterwards he went to Malibu and sat on the beach and watched the  
waves break on the shore like lies like lies like lies . . .

## hooked

28,000 of us sat there on  
opening day  
one hour before post  
with our *Racing Forms*  
and our programs and our  
newspapers and our coffees  
when the announcer said,  
“ladies and gentlemen, we regret to  
announce that the mutuel clerks  
have gone on strike and refuse to  
sell tickets so there will be no  
racing today. rain checks will be issued at  
the gates beginning at  
one p.m.”  
an elderly man in a Hawaiian shirt and black  
shoes took out a .45  
and blew his left eye out and through the back of his  
skull.  
everybody felt bad.  
“there’s nothing to do now,” I told my girlfriend,  
“but go home and go to bed. we’ll race  
each other.”

the next day I bought a newspaper and looked  
to see if it had all really  
happened.  
it had all really happened.

and when they opened the track again  
5 days later

28,000 people sat in the stands again  
with their *Racing Forms*  
and their programs and their newspapers  
and their coffees  
one hour before post.

## found poems

I know I shouldn't write so many poems  
but  
it's a form of self-entertainment which  
AMAZINGLY  
I am paid for.  
I live alone in this large house with 2  
cats (there were 3, one died)  
and at my age it's realistic to assume that  
I might also die  
one of these a.m. nights  
after writing 10 or 12 poems  
and that's where the laugh  
comes in:  
before I bed down I place the new  
poems  
neatly in the center of my desk so that  
when the stink gets bad  
and the neighbors complain or  
when my girlfriend phones and the phone goes  
unanswered

the poems will be found.  
not that my death will be tragic or  
important

(I will be out of  
here)

but the poems themselves will  
let them know

(those carping little  
critics)

that I was good until the end  
or maybe even  
better.



## runaway inflation

is the light bill  
paid?  
and the landlord?  
they say gasoline  
is going to go up  
20 cents a gallon  
every month  
from now on.  
soon it will  
take a  
month's salary  
to get a blow job  
from an Imperial Highway  
hooker.

time to crank grandma's  
ass out of the rocker  
and *put her* back to work.

all facial tissue and toilet paper  
must be used again and again if  
possible.

even the birds on the window  
sill  
must no longer be allowed to  
sit there  
for free.

this future rolling toward us  
paralyzes the wallet and the  
brain.

those superior outer space  
creatures  
can't arrive too soon  
for me.  
tell them to bring cash.

or maybe they're too smart to want any  
part of us?

chances are  
the way things are going  
only the Imperial Highway hookers  
will survive  
to finally inherit the  
earth.

## the significance was obscure

we've been married 30 years,  
he told me.

to what do you attribute your marital  
success? I asked.

we both roll the toothpaste tube  
from the bottom,  
he said.

the next morning  
before brushing  
I rolled the toothpaste tube  
from the bottom.

of course, since I live alone,  
the significance was  
obscure

as it usually  
is.

## cracking the odds

I've been playing the  
horses  
for so long  
that I have seen  
a whole  
parade of  
jockeys  
come and  
go  
and  
women too  
and  
presidents  
but  
somehow  
for me  
the jocks  
have become the  
markers of my  
time.

I've seen them  
come in as  
bug boys,\*  
then I've seen  
them turn  
red hot,  
dominate the  
meetings—  
almost always

\*bug boy: an apprentice jock is allowed 5 pounds off the horse's assigned weight until he achieves a certain number of wins or rides a certain number of times, whichever comes first.

getting that  
horse's nose  
to the wire first  
in the photo  
finishes.

I've seen them  
continue  
like that  
for a while  
and then—  
almost at  
once—  
slow down,  
turn  
hesitant,  
unsure,  
and finally  
give way  
to the next  
hot  
jock.

in the  
arts,  
in the field  
of entertainment,  
in the world  
of  
business  
the same  
process  
holds  
sway

but  
the jocks  
really  
define  
the daring  
and the  
sadness  
of the  
struggle  
for me.

take Johnny  
who was  
one of the  
greatest  
front runners  
of  
our time,  
a  
real  
wire-to-wire  
master.  
he trains them  
now  
but isn't very  
good  
at that.

you can  
see him  
now  
in the tack  
room,

tiny  
in his chair,  
playing cards  
with the  
Mexican  
hot walkers  
and  
losing  
money to  
them  
day after  
day.

“hey, Johnny,  
you wanna  
play cards,  
man?”

jocks like Johnny  
define the  
tragedy of life  
for me  
more than does  
the  
passing of  
Marco Polo,  
Picasso  
or  
Henry the  
8th.

jocks like Johnny  
define life's struggle

for me,  
so small and  
brave.

while Kant  
lies stiff in  
his  
grave  
and Mozart  
turns to dust

Johnny  
flips  
down a  
card

and  
finally  
wins  
a  
hand.



## working through it all

the bravery of some is close to fear  
and the fear of some is close to  
bravery  
and I admire a brave man more than a fearful  
man,  
and sometimes I am one or the other  
and often I am neither.

that's when I'm best: neither brave nor  
fearful

just cracking nuts in my warm  
alcove

as flowers strain to grow  
as music strives to please

as the ladies love  
others.

## giving thanks

I have to admire  
that most abused of the human  
species:  
the white American  
middle-class  
male.

as a writer  
I have been criticized for  
writing unkindly of  
females;  
other writers have been  
criticized  
for writing unkindly of  
Blacks,  
Orientals,  
homosexuals,  
lesbians,  
Amerindians,  
the aged,  
the unborn  
the newly  
born  
the lame  
or the Chicanos  
the Jews  
the French  
the Italians  
the Greeks  
the English  
or the  
whatevers.

actually,  
making mild minor  
sport of  
or criticizing  
almost any minority  
group  
has ruined the  
careers of not only  
writers but  
politicians  
sports commentators,  
and people in  
entertainment.

it is a touchy age.  
everybody is on the  
defensive.  
you must not  
speak unkindly about  
*us*,  
they say,  
or  
we will finish  
you  
off!

now for a writer,  
this is grade-a  
hell.  
a good writer  
must simply let  
it all go,  
regardless.

if I find a Black  
or a woman  
or a dog  
or a cripple  
or a tree  
or a child  
or an Oriental  
individually  
obnoxious  
I think it is my  
duty to describe  
them as  
such.

I often describe myself  
as obnoxious,  
for example.

I demand that all territories  
be open for  
criticism!

I will not  
be guilty of  
treading  
heavily  
on the truth!

even so,  
I still give everlasting  
thanks  
to the white American  
middle-class

male  
who can still be trashed and  
insulted and  
demeaned again and  
again  
and no one ever protests,  
and he never protests,  
he just doesn't give a  
damn.

but, oh, says the  
politically correct  
chorus,  
they're just too satisfied  
with their mundane  
existence!

yes, some of them  
are,  
but not all of them.  
some of them are  
just as heroic  
as homosexuals  
and lesbians  
and feminists,  
and Blacks,  
and all the etceteras;  
and in some cases,  
even more  
so.  
but our white American  
middle-class male

never protests  
when I find *him*  
out of  
order.

but, says the  
politically correct chorus,  
that's because  
he's running the  
show!

maybe,  
maybe not.

all I know is  
that as a writer  
he's a good and fair  
and uncomplaining  
target  
for me.  
I can abuse him  
and punch  
him,  
I can lay him  
low in the  
poem,  
I can abuse him  
in stories, novels and  
screenplays,  
and he'll take it all  
without a  
whimper.

in our very restrictive  
overprotective  
society  
it's great for a writer  
to have one such wide-open  
playground to play  
around  
in.

so again here's to  
the white American middle-class  
male,  
the butt of  
all the jokes,  
the clown,  
the brute,  
the watcher of tv,  
the dog,  
the drinker of beer,  
the sexist pig,  
the bumbling husband,  
the fat-bellied  
dim-witted  
nincompoop  
who will take every  
possible abuse  
and say  
nothing,  
he'll just  
light a fresh  
cigar,  
shift uncomfortably in his

chair and try to  
smile.

here's to this  
forgotten  
hero!

now, go  
ahead,  
hate  
me.



## Los Angeles

there is an old saying:  
that those whom the gods wish to  
destroy,  
they first make  
angry.

driving the freeways  
each day  
it appears to me  
that  
the gods are getting  
ready  
to  
destroy the entire  
City  
of  
Angels.

2,294

spoiled woman  
washing your panties  
in suds and cold water

your eyes are angry  
as they watch me  
and the world

you feel that you've wasted  
your years  
and yourself

it didn't work  
for me  
either

but isn't there always  
one good thing  
to look back on?

think of  
how many cups of coffee we  
drank together.

## why do you write so many poems about death?

Shakespeare's dead.

photo of dead Hemingway  
downstairs in the hall:  
*For Whom the Bell Tolls.*

Pascal.  
Hitler.  
Sammy Davis Jr.  
Marconi.

the little old lady next door who watered her  
geraniums.

the hunting dogs of the mad Count  
Dracula.

almost all the Tarzans.

and Jane.

my first  
wife  
and  
Primo Carnera.

and you're going to die too,  
old man, you and your white  
legs,  
you and your pose,  
devil-may-care,  
playing it tough

like you know it  
all.

smoking and typing  
you look down, you're in your  
shorts  
and on your leg a spot of  
blood.  
what?  
something drips.  
it's your  
nose.  
some of it has dripped  
onto your shirt.

Christ, your wife will be  
pissed.

## evidence

whores and great poets should  
avoid one another:  
their professions are dangerously  
similar:  
from the Roman Empire to our  
Atomic Age  
there have been about an equal  
number of whores and  
poets  
with the authorities continually  
trying to outlaw  
the former  
and ignore the latter  
—which tells you  
how dangerous  
poetry  
really  
is.

## part 3

the problem with

c  
o  
n  
c  
r  
e  
t

poetry

i

s

the

s

a

m

as the

problem with

c  
o  
n  
c  
r  
e  
t

people



## a wise ass

that's what I was on campus, some of the professors, I'm sure,  
feared me or at least preferred that I not be in their  
class.

I had a scarred and lean countenance and I slouched  
in my seat  
hungover and dangerous.

I refused to buy the assigned books or study.

I was insolent, cool and crazy and I drank and fought every night.  
my parents supported me out of fear.

I was the meanest 18-year-old son of a bitch in the  
world.

I would leap up in class and make incoherent  
speeches challenging whatever the professor had just  
said.

I was a pain in the ass and I thought I was tough but I was afraid to  
go out for the football team or ask a girl for a  
date.

I guess I was crazy.

all I read was Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

I was taking journalism and art classes and  
when they asked us for one writing assignment a  
week, I wrote seven.

some said I was a genius.

I felt like a genius or I felt like I thought a genius  
should feel.

one day I got in a fight after art class with the  
200-pound fullback of the football team.

we fought for 30 minutes on the campus  
lawn.

unfortunately nobody stopped us.

I finally won although I never expected to.

I kept waiting to lose and it didn't happen.

then I began to get popular and I couldn't take that so



I pretended to be a born-again Nazi.  
then I got a lot of freaky guys full of hate trailing  
after me so  
I told them to fuck off and I became the school  
recluse.  
I don't know, after two years on campus I didn't  
want it anymore so  
I quit and got a job in the railroad yards as a  
laborer.  
I rented a small room downtown and roamed the  
streets at night.  
some genius I was, some god-damned  
genius!  
I made several trips to the *Herald-Examiner* and the  
*L.A. Times* and told them I wanted to become a  
reporter.  
I never made it past the receptionist's desk.  
"fill out these forms," they said.  
I shoved them back.  
they didn't know I was a genius.

one night in a bar I got in a fight with a little  
guy, he must have weighed only 130 pounds.  
he whipped my ass.  
the next night I tested him once more.  
he whipped my ass all over again.

a week later I took a bus to New Orleans.  
somewhere along the way I bought a book by  
a famous guy called  
Hemingway.  
I couldn't read it.  
the fucking guy couldn't write!

I tossed the book out the window.  
a girl on the bus kept staring at me.  
she turned in her seat and made a  
sketch of my face.  
she wrote her address on  
the back of the sketch and  
got off at Fort Worth.  
I went on to Dallas, got off, caught a shave,  
showered at the “Y,”  
took a bus back to Fort Worth and found her.  
I sat in the front room with her while her mother  
sat in the bedroom.  
we talked a long time, it was great, she was beautiful.  
then she held my hand and  
started talking about God and I got the  
fuck out of there.

I took another bus to New Orleans.  
I had a portable typewriter with me.  
that’s all that I needed  
to prove I was a genius.  
that, and another 35  
years.

## the dressmaker

my first wife made her own dresses  
which I thought was nice.  
I'd often see her bent over her  
sewing machine  
putting together a new dress.  
we were both working and I thought  
it was great that she found the time  
to create her own  
wardrobe.

then one evening I came home and  
she was crying.  
she told me that some guy at work  
had told her that she had bad  
taste in her wearing  
apparel.  
he had said she looked  
“tacky.”

“do you think I dress tacky?”  
she asked.  
“of course not.  
who is this guy?  
I'll beat hell out of him!”

“you can't, he's my boss.”

she cried some more that  
evening.  
I tried to reassure her and she  
finally stopped.

but after that, she purchased  
all her dresses.  
I thought that  
they didn't look nearly as good on her  
but she told me that the fellow at work  
had praised her new  
clothes.

well, as long as she stopped  
crying  
I was satisfied.

then one day she asked me, "which do  
you like best, my old dresses or  
the new ones?"

"you look good either way," I  
answered.

"yes, but which do you *prefer*?  
the old dresses or the new ones?"

"the old ones," I told her.

then she began crying again  
and wouldn't stop.

there were similar problems with other  
aspects of our  
marriage.

when she divorced me she was still  
wearing only the store-bought  
dresses

but she took the sewing machine  
with her  
and a suitcase filled with dresses  
of the old  
kind.

## lunch in Beverly Hills

it's a shame, it's a damned shame,  
sitting here at this table  
spread with a clean white tablecloth,  
on a veranda overlooking Beverly Blvd.  
a light lunch, you might even say a  
business lunch, your lawyer has  
collected some money due you from  
a movie producer.  
your bright energetic lady  
lawyer, her assistant and my wife,  
we eat and drink wine, and then order coffee and talk  
mostly about the impending war  
as at all the tables around us  
there is more talk about the im-  
pending war (although at the table just  
behind us some men laugh loudly  
so they must be talking about  
something else).

I feel very strange, very odd  
that we are sitting at this table  
spread with an immaculate white  
tablecloth with all the successful  
people sitting here with us  
with the war about to start  
tomorrow  
or next week  
as we sit over wine and coffee  
on a beautiful, clear day in  
Beverly Hills.

and although I am guilty of nothing,  
I feel guilty nonetheless.

I think that I would feel better about every  
thing if I was sitting instead in a cheap room  
with flies crawling my wine  
cup.  
not pleasant, of course, but at least it's war of  
another kind.

but I am in Beverly Hills and that is  
all that there is to  
it.

I reach for my gold card as I  
twist in my chair and  
ask the waiter for the  
bill.

she was really mad

I love you, she said,  
and spit in a bowl of  
jello  
put it in the  
refrigerator  
and said,  
you can eat that later  
for dinner!

then she was gone  
like a whirlwind  
out the door  
in a rush of angry  
skirt.



## a tree, a road, a toad

a table of 7, all  
laughing loudly, again and again,  
almost deafening,  
but there is no joy in their  
laughter, it seems machine  
made.  
the pretense and falsity  
poison the air.  
the other diners seem not to  
notice.  
I am asphyxiated by the laughter,  
my gut, my mind, my very meaning  
gag on it.  
I dream of taking a gun, of  
walking over to the table  
and blowing their heads off,  
one by one.  
of course, this would make me  
far more guilty than they  
are.  
still, I have the thought and  
then I realize that I expect too  
much.  
I should have long ago  
realized that this is the way  
it is:  
that everywhere there are tables of 2,  
3, 7, 10 or more  
where people  
laugh meaninglessly and  
without joy,  
laugh inanely without  
real feeling,

and that this is an inevitable part  
of all that,  
like a tree, a road, a toad.

I order another drink and  
decide not to kill them, even  
in my imagination.

I decide, instead, that I am a  
very lucky man:  
the table is twenty feet away.  
I could be *at* that table, sitting there  
with them,  
close to their mouths,  
close to their eyes and their ears  
and their hands,  
actually *listening* to the conversation  
which is causing their joyless  
laughter.

I have been in many such situations before  
and it has been one bloody cross,  
indeed.

so, I settle for my good fortune  
but can't help but wonder  
if there is any place left in the world  
with a table of 7 where  
there are genuine feelings,  
where there is  
great and real laughter.  
I hope so.  
I have to hope so.

## in one ear and out the other

my father had memorized many sayings that he liked to repeat over and over:

“if you can’t succeed, suck eggs!”

“my country, right or wrong!”

“early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise!”

my mother just smiled as he mouthed these pearls of wisdom.

me?

I thought, this man is a fool.

“any man who wants a job can get one!” was one of his favorites during the Depression years.

almost everything he said was stupid.

he called my mother “mama.”

“mama, we gotta move out of this neighborhood!”

“why, daddy?”

“because I saw one, mama!”

“one what, daddy?”

“a nigger . . .”

another one of his favorites was:

“eenie, meanie, miney, mo, catch a nigger by the toe, if he hollers make him pay, 50 dollars every day!”

he never voiced these aphorisms while sitting down but always while marching smartly about the house.

“God helps those who help themselves!”

“you listen to your father, Henry,” my mother would tell me.

that poor woman, she meant it.

“don’t do as I do,” he’d shout, “but do as I say!”

I ended up doing neither.

and the day I looked down at him in his coffin

I almost expected him to say something

but he didn’t so I spoke up for

him:

“dead men tell no more tales.”

thank Christ, I had heard enough.

then

they closed the lid and my uncle Jack and

I went out for hamburgers and fries.

we sat there with the food in front of us.

“your father was a good man,” Uncle Jack said.

“Jack,” I replied, “good for what?”

## excuses

once again  
I hear of somebody who is going to  
settle down and  
do their work,  
painting or writing or whatever,  
as soon as they get a better light  
installed,  
or as soon as they move to a new  
city,  
or as soon as they come back from the trip they  
have been planning,  
or as soon as . . .

it's simple: they just don't want  
to do it,  
or they can't do it,  
otherwise they'd feel a burning  
itch from hell  
they could not ignore  
and "soon"  
would turn quickly into  
"now."

## bygone days

once upon a time men used to wait in  
the front room, smoking cigars, drinking brandy  
and discussing the important things, the manly  
things, as the ladies worked in the kitchen  
preparing dinner while we enjoyed the  
aroma of spices, the smell of  
cooking meat and our conversation.

always, there was plenty of brandy and more serious talk.

we had come through some very difficult times  
the wars and what-not and  
now we were in charge, invincible and very male: our  
expectations, our dress, our manner,  
we were as lions resting comfortably  
in our homes as the feast was  
prepared.

it was our just due. no questions asked.

at mealtime we would fill ourselves,  
offering up appreciative grunts,  
nodding affirmatives to our ladies; we were well fed and  
well pleased.

then followed the removal of the main course and on to the  
dessert and the coffee.

that done, the ladies would remove the empty  
plates and we would relax awhile over our coffee  
as the ladies began washing the dishes in the  
kitchen.

“let’s go back to the front room,” the host would finally say.

there we would switch from brandy to whiskey or scotch. sobered by the meal we lighted fine Cuban cigars as the sound of running water and the clanking of plates emanated from the kitchen.

yes, the world was exactly as we wanted it to be

until female liberation began and now we are often found in the kitchen, washing the dishes, and sometimes we even have to cook the meal, too.

the ladies now go cocktailing around 2:30 p.m., chatting, gossiping, they get giddy, giggle, and often are intoxicated. sometimes they get into tearful arguments.

the kitchen is forgotten; the ladies are liberated; they chain-smoke and wear pantsuits instead of dresses; they curse simply as a matter of course; they toss around words like “fuck” and “shit” and they are particularly fond of shouting “piss off!” they spill drinks on themselves, laugh hysterically.

the men are uncomfortable and exchange little side glances; they say nothing, just as the women used to do.

the men have given up smoking, and drink sparingly: they are now the “designated drivers.”

the ladies discuss everything: politics, world affairs, philosophy, art and sundry other matters.

once in a while one of the men will speak out. it will usually be something about sports, like, "I think the Yankees need a new center fielder."

"what?" one of the other men will say. "I didn't hear you."

the ladies are laughing, talking loudly, cursing, smoking, pouring fresh drinks . . .

"what?"

"I said, 'I think the Yankees need a new center fielder.'"

"oh yes, I think you're right."

then the men will fall back into a profound silence.

they are waiting for night to fall.



## in a lady's bedroom

trying to write a poem  
in a lady's bedroom  
(onions on my breath)  
while she cuts a dress  
out of freshly bought  
material.

I suppose, as material,  
I'm not so fresh,  
especially with onions  
on my breath.

well, let's see—  
there's a lady in Echo Park,  
one in Pasadena, one  
in Sacramento, one on  
Harvard Ave.  
perhaps one of them would be more interested  
in me  
than in a dress (for a while,  
anyhow).

meanwhile I sit in this  
lady's bedroom  
by a hot window  
while she sits at her  
sewing machine.

here, she said, here's a  
paper and pen,  
write something.

all right, I'll be kind:  
some ladies fuck like mink  
and dance like nymphs  
and some create  
nice dresses and lonely poets  
on hot July  
afternoons.

## model friend

Wentworth worked as a model.  
he even got paid for it and he didn't  
look any different from  
the rest of us.

“put on your cap for Hank. show  
him how you posed as a sea  
captain,” said Clara.

Clara was his woman.  
I was with Jane.

we were drinking in their apartment,  
a very nice place.  
we lived in a tiny room  
just a few blocks away and were far  
behind in the rent.

we had brought along our own wine  
and they were drinking it.  
I was 40 pounds underweight  
barely alive and  
going crazy.

Wentworth got his cap and  
put it on.  
it was blue and flopped just  
right.  
he stood in front of a full-  
length mirror and smiled.

I was being sued in the aftermath  
of a driving accident

had ulcers  
and every time I drank whiskey I  
spit up blood.

“Wentworth,” I told him, “you look  
dashing.”

why don't they give us something to  
eat? I thought. can't they see that  
we're starving?

Wentworth turned from the mirror  
and looked at me. “modeling is a  
good show. what do you do?”

“Hank's a writer,” Jane said.

Jane was a good girl: she answered all the  
questions for me.

“oh,” said Clara, “how fascinating!  
how's it going?”

“things are a little slow,” I  
said.

Wentworth sat down and poured himself  
another drink.

“wanna arm wrestle?” he asked me.

“o.k.,” I said, “I'll try you.”

we bellied up to the table, came to grips, nodded, and he slammed my arm on the table like a marsh reed.

“well,” I said, “you were best that time.”

“wanna try another?”

“not right away.”

“maybe I can get you into modeling?”

“what as?”

“or into a secretarial position. how many words can you type a minute?”

“I’m into longhand right now.”

“what do you write about?”

“death.”

“death? nobody wants to read about that.”

“I think you’re right.”

the girls were talking to each other. then Clara got up and went to the

bedroom.  
she was there awhile.  
then she came out with a new hat  
on.  
she stood,  
smiling.

“oh, Clara,” said Jane, “it’s  
*lovely!*”

“women don’t wear hats anymore,” said  
Clara, “but I just *love* hats!”

“you *should*, you look so *dear!*”

so there was Wentworth in his blue sea  
captain’s cap and there was Clara in her new  
purple foxglove.

“wanna try another arm wrestle?” asked  
Wentworth. “the best two out of  
three?”

“just pour me a drink.”

“oh, sorry . . .”

the evening continued and we got to be good  
friends, I suppose.  
we sang some songs, sea songs among them,  
and Wentworth gave me a cigar.  
I was proud of Jane.  
she had a great little figure, just

right.  
even when we didn't eat for days I was  
the only one who lost weight  
which sometimes gave me the idea that  
she might be eating someplace else while I  
practiced my new longhand prose style.  
but it didn't matter: she deserved the  
food.

meanwhile  
I begged off the arm wrestling and we  
kept drinking my wine.  
when it was gone  
the evening was over.

I remember standing in their doorway  
hugging him and her  
saying  
goodbye, yes, yes, it was a great  
evening.

and then the door closed and  
there was the empty street.  
as we walked back to our  
room Jane said, "look at that  
moon! isn't that moon  
wonderful?"  
I couldn't say it was so I  
didn't answer.

then we were standing in the hall of our  
roominghouse.

I took out the key  
and stuck it in the door and it snapped in  
half and the door wouldn't open and the key  
wouldn't come back out so I gave the door what  
shoulder I had and it split open and  
as it did some guy down the hall hollered,  
"HEY, YOU GOD-DAMNED DRUNKS, I GOT A  
GOOD MIND TO SEND YOU DOWN THE RIVER IN A  
SACK OF SHIT!"

it sounded like mr. big mouth lived in  
room 8.

I walked down to room 8 and  
knocked. "come on out," I said. "I've got  
something for you."

there wasn't any answer.

Jane was at my side. "you've got the  
wrong door."

"I've got the right door," I told her.  
I BANGED on the son of a bitch.

"COME ON OUT, FUCKER! I'LL KILL YOU!"

"it was room 9," said Jane.  
"you got the wrong door."

I walked down to 9 and BANGED again. "COME ON  
OUT, FUCKER, AND I'LL KILL YOU!"



“if you don’t go away,” I heard a voice say from behind the door, “I’m going to call the police!”

“you chickenshit scum,” I said.

I walked back to our room and Jane followed me.  
she closed the door and I sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled off my shoes and stockings.

“your buddy in the sailor cap,” I told her, “he gets on my nerves.”

## the invitation

listen, Chinaski, we've always LOVED your work, we've got all your books, especially the dirty ones, you just really get the word down and we love you, I love you, and I just busted up with my old man, he liked your stuff too, he was the one who introduced me to your shit and now I'm living with a guy in his pick-up truck who makes his living at swap meets, he hates your writing but I hated it too when I first read it, anyhow the rest of us (and we're some GANG) we've got this idea, we're kind of Funk City, you know, and we thought we'd throw a party in CELEBRATION OF YOU, we don't bow down to too many pricks but your stuff just tears us up, SO—we got together and scrounged up a few chips (that's MONEY, HONEY) and we'll meet you at the airport, we got this great orange VW for one and then there's Ricky's pick-up, so there's TRANSPORTATION, and there's a *good* gang here, plenty of beer and you see we want to CELEBRATE YOU in the way you deserve and even tho you're an ugly fuck we can probably (?) line you up with something young and tender. maybe we can also fix you up a reading at the local bar, plenty of cowboys and x-cons who understand where you're coming from, you gotta be the greatest writer since Kerouac and so here it is—our invitation—in honor of ya, come on up and if nobody will lay you my pussy ain't too dry, ain't too bad, I'm 22 and last month I went to the Naropa Institute over in Colorado, to their last fucking function, and I asked, "WHERE'S CHINASKI?" and they acted like they never heard the name, that bunch could make the Sphinx puke, really, so listen, let us know soon!!!!

love,

MOONCHILD

PS:

832-4170 (I use the phone at the pharmacy, ask for Larry and tell him ya got a message for the KEEPER OF THE STARS AND BARS, he'll know who you mean!)

## Hollywood hustle

the first one came up to me while I was  
eating in the Italian cafe  
and he said,  
“pardon me, sir, may I read the Home Section  
of your newspaper?”  
“no,” I said, “you may not.”

I finished eating and went outside and  
another guy stopped me at the corner:  
“hey, Jack, can you use a  
watch?”  
he opened his hand and in his  
palm was a  
wristwatch. “can’t use it,”  
I said.

I walked across the street and down a  
block and another guy stopped  
me. he was carrying 2  
pool sticks.  
“listen,” he said, “I need 50 cents more  
to get a meal. and by the way, can I  
sell you a pool stick?”

I shook my head,  
gave him a quarter and walked  
on.

a man shouldn’t say “no” all night  
long and I just can’t shoot a  
decent game of  
pool.

## Buddha Chinaski says

sometimes  
you have to take  
a step or  
two  
back,  
re-  
treat

take  
a month  
off

don't  
do anything  
don't  
want to  
do anything

peace is  
paramount  
pace is  
paramount

whatever  
you want  
you aren't going to  
get  
it by  
trying too  
hard.

take  
ten years  
off

you'll  
be  
stronger

take  
twenty years  
off

you'll  
be much  
stronger.

there's nothing to  
win  
anyhow

and  
remember  
the second best thing in  
the world  
is  
a good night's  
sleep

and  
the best:  
a gentle  
death.

meanwhile  
pay your gas  
bill  
if you can  
and  
stay out of  
arguments with the  
wife.

## like Lazarus

the unknown time and place of  
your death is a  
mystery, isn't it?  
also the manner of your  
death?  
you can go while tying a  
shoelace  
or you can go with a knife  
in your belly.

you can go in fear,  
you can go in peace,  
you can go without being aware  
of either.

in L.A. County General Hospital  
my ward was next to the  
operating room.  
I was a poor sleeper  
and I was often awake  
between 3 and 6 a.m.  
and that was when they  
wheeled the bodies  
out,  
bodies covered  
with a sheet,  
and the doors would swing open  
and the heads would  
come out first,  
then the remainder of  
the body  
followed,

rolled along by the  
white-clad  
orderly.

I always counted the  
bodies.  
one, two, three,  
four every blessed  
night.

no need for me to  
count sheep,  
I had something better.

one night they broke  
the record (at least  
during my sojourn),  
they got up to  
8.

I waited and waited  
for #9  
but he/she never  
came.

the sun finally came up  
however  
and the bedpans  
were rattled  
and the nurses  
made grim jokes  
and complained of their



domestic  
problems.

our ward was a  
special ward  
where they put the  
desperate cases,  
we were all  
teetering on the  
edge  
and some of us  
finally  
went  
over,  
but the goings  
(at least during my  
sojourn)  
weren't bloody,  
ugly or even  
dramatic.  
there was even  
a tinge of boredom  
about it  
all.

“Mr. Williams, Mr. Williams . . .  
here's your breakfast!  
Mr. Williams?  
Mr. Williams?  
oh, he's  
gone . . .”

there was never an  
empty bed  
for long.  
they changed the  
sheets and Williams was  
replaced by Miss Jones and when  
Jones went she was  
replaced by  
Mr. Wong.

and the sun came  
up blazing  
in the mornings  
just to taunt us  
and there was much  
time to waste.  
we were too far gone to speak  
to one another and  
the only sounds were  
wheezing and  
occasional bits of  
coughing or  
groaning  
and every now and then  
a weak and pitiable voice  
mewing  
“nurse . . . nurse . . .”

I left that place, that palace  
of death, without looking  
back.  
I went down the aisle

between the beds  
and  
then down many  
steps  
(I didn't count  
them)  
and out the front  
entrance into the  
street.

I phoned the cab  
from a nearby  
bar.  
the cab took me over  
the bridge,  
over the invisible  
L.A. River  
and we went back  
to my part of  
town.  
it was a crazy feeling  
finally  
being  
out.

I paid the cabby and  
went up the  
walk.  
I still had my key,  
I put it in the front door  
and opened  
it.

the room was on the  
second floor,  
up a steep  
stairway.

the dog met me halfway  
up.  
he was a big one,  
he leaped at me  
joyously,  
his tail whipping like a  
snake on  
fire.  
I was still weak and  
he almost pushed me  
over.

I walked on up the  
stairway and down the long hall  
and into the small  
room.

she was sitting on the  
couch, smoking a  
cigarette and  
reading a  
magazine.

startled,  
she looked  
up.

“Jesus, why didn’t you  
tell me?”  
she asked.

“what’s there to  
tell?  
is there any  
beer?”

she got up, walked quickly  
into the kitchen  
with an uneasy smile,  
looking back at me  
over her  
shoulder.

## soft and fat like summer roses

Rex was a two-fisted man  
who drank like a fish  
and looked like a purple anemone.  
he married three others  
before he found the right one.  
they fought over cheap gin  
were friendless  
and satisfied  
and frightened the landlord.  
then she began to holler plenty  
and he would listen dully,  
then leap up red with choice words  
until she began again.  
it was a good life,  
soft and fat like summer roses.

good bedmates  
they were  
until he got hurt at work, near  
fatally, it seemed,  
and he stayed in bed then  
smiling it off  
while she got a job as a waitress  
in a cheap café  
where the lads were rather rough,  
sometimes drunk, slapping her rear while  
Rex drank gin in bed while  
she walked about, saying nothing,  
thinking about a Greek who came in  
mornings,  
touched her hand, quietly said “eggs,  
eggs again.”

Rex continued to drink gin in bed  
and one night she didn't come back.  
nor the next. nor the next.  
and with a lurch, he got out of bed  
and walked holding to walls  
around and around and around  
and fell, clutching the carpet,  
saying, "o, Christ! o, Christ!"

the Greek was very different,  
he didn't drink at all and  
said he believed in God,  
he loved diffidently, like a butterfly,  
and he had a new refrigerator.

Rex was sitting in bed with the gin  
one dark night  
when she returned, saying nothing.

"bitch! cheap bitch!" he said as  
she sat down on the bed, fully dressed,  
and looked pleased to see him.  
later he stood upright on the floor,  
smiling and himself again, and  
said, "I'm going back to work tomorrow  
morning.  
and you, you stay out of that goddamn café!"

## in transit

the French border guard had a black waxed  
mustache and an ivory face with pimples  
for eyes.

he stank of perfume and his uniform  
was wrinkled but his boots were  
new and shiny: the overhead  
lights reflected in them and made  
me dizzy.

he was frosty, he was filled with a  
strange cold rage.

it was only 15 degrees outside  
but in that building  
with too much heating and all the hot  
lights  
it must have been  
110.

the heat  
only maddened the  
guard.  
little drops of sweat ran down his nose  
and dripped off.  
he looked dangerous.

“PASSPORT!” he screamed.

I handed it over, smiling blandly at him.

he poked at the photo.

“IS THIS YOU?”



“yes, sir.”

“YOU LOOK YOUNGER THAN THIS  
PHOTOGRAPH!”

“I was ill when the photo was  
taken . . .”

“ILL? WHAT WAS IT?”

“the flu . . .”

“THE FLU?”

I didn't reply.

he opened my suitcase and  
began to take the contents  
out.  
he flung them all about, then  
stopped.

“WHAT ARE THESE  
PAPERS?”

“paintings . . .”

“WHOSE?”

“I painted them.”

he glared at me, his wax mustache  
quivering.  
then,

“ALL RIGHT. YOU CAN GO  
THROUGH!”

I went to work gathering up my  
things.

next in line was a voluptuous  
young lady.  
the guard snatched her  
passport, looked at it, then smiled  
at her.

I had my suitcase put together  
and was leaving  
when I heard him:

*“he said he was a painter!”*

then I was out of there and soon  
I was out of the building  
and into the 15  
degrees  
and it was so fine and lovely  
out there, truly  
refreshing.

“dear Mr. Chinaski”

I have tried your publisher with my  
work.  
they didn't understand my poems  
and they say their schedule is  
filled for now,  
so I thought maybe you should read  
my manuscript  
and then talk to them.  
I've also enclosed an envelope for your  
response.  
I've long been an admirer of your  
work,  
and I don't want to kiss your ass,  
but I consider you one of our  
greatest living writers,  
so if you would just look over the poems  
enclosed, I'll be forever in  
your debt.

one of the greatest living writers  
read them,  
trashed them, including the stamped  
and addressed  
return envelope.

what a helpless soft son of a bitch!

the way he wrote he  
was.

## silverfish

“SILVERFISH!” my father would  
holler and my mother would come  
running with the special can  
of spray.

my father was always finding  
silverfish.  
it seemed to go on for days  
and years on  
end:  
“SILVERFISH!”

I saw a silverfish  
now and then  
but I never said  
anything.

mostly they liked to hang  
around the bathtub  
or in dark wet  
places.

they hardly seemed a  
threat  
to me.

but my father’s hysterical excitement  
upon finding a  
silverfish  
never  
abated.

well, it did after my  
mother's death  
because my father had nobody  
to holler at.

then my father died  
and in his casket he looked  
just like—  
you know—  
a big one.

but I didn't holler  
anything.

## the popularity kid

they are good fellows all, in one way or another,  
but they all seem to find you on the same day at  
the racetrack, especially when your mood isn't one of  
the best.

the first one, you don't remember his name,  
he pushes his face real close  
and starts talking fast and loud but the meaning  
of what he says passes right over your head.

after a bit you

break away from him somehow and maybe there's 15  
minutes' peace, then a mutuel clerk catches your  
eye, waves you over, he's one big smile, grabs  
your hand and pumps it, he's asking about some-  
body you both know but it's really about nothing  
at all. "have you seen Mike

lately?"

"no, I haven't."

luckily, somebody behind me wants to buy a  
ticket and I quickly move away.

a race passes and I am walking along when another  
poor soul jumps me, he's all smiles too and he pumps  
my hand but doesn't say anything, he just stares,  
smiling, smiling.

he's in the horse business and I ask him something  
about his horses and when I get the answer  
I say, "great!" then spin on my heel and move  
off.

just before the last race I am approached by two  
complete strangers.

now, I am going to have to say something ugly.

I have absolutely no interest in any of these people

and never would approach them myself.  
why do they feel a need for me?  
is it cordiality? fear? respect? boredom?

and it's not only the racetrack, it's wherever I  
go.  
say, in my supermarket, the manager will rush toward  
me, his arms widespread.  
there is this sushi place, when I enter, the owner will  
greet me and bow low.  
he does not do this for his other customers.  
at a Mexican restaurant I frequent, the owner  
always rushes over, slides into my booth, puts an arm  
about me and says, "it's good to see you!"  
at this Chinese place, the waitresses gather around  
my table, chatter, make jokes and expound  
little Oriental philosophies.  
it also happens to me in gas stations, etc.  
I never make the first overture, I always try to keep a low  
profile but it doesn't seem to help.

what is it?  
I don't find myself interesting.  
it must be pity, I must look woeful,  
at death's door.  
but then, thinking back, all this began when I was  
about 16 years old, people began trailing me, wanting  
to be friends, attaching themselves to me.  
granted, many of them were mentally defective, but not  
all of them.  
it was back then when I first began evading  
people, hiding from them, finding excuses to  
discard them as friends, and it has gone on ever since.

I'm a god-damned magnet to the human herd  
and I don't like it and I don't want it and it won't  
stop.

I'm just going to have to die to get away and even that  
might not work:

the ghouls will come running toward me, arms outstretched,  
saying, "hey, Chinaski, we've been waiting for you!  
we wanna drink beer with you and talk!  
just talk and drink beer!  
now we can hang out with you  
forever, baby, FOREVER!"



## death and white glue

the tiny summer creatures are flying  
all around here now and  
I have nothing to  
smoke.

now  
all around here  
tiny summer creatures fly.  
I usually blow smoke at them  
and at the lamp bulb  
and watch the smoke curl in the air  
and sometimes think of things  
like  
death and white glue.  
the summer creatures bite at night  
when I am asleep  
and in the morning I have bumps on my  
body  
which are delightful to  
scratch.

my love is upstairs watching a comedy on  
tv.  
down here I am drinking wine  
*Liebfraumilch*  
and my love considers this a  
betrayal of our love, but  
you and I know what a betrayal of love really  
is.

meanwhile  
I crush some of the tiny summer creatures  
some find the white glue

but I leave a few of them  
so that I am able to scratch myself in the  
morning.

the summer creatures are so strange  
I feel that they know me—  
one falls into my glass of  
*Liebfraumilch*  
I watch him flick and kick about  
and then I  
drink him down.

I hope that comedy is good  
upstairs. I have my own show going on down  
here.

## fun times: 1930

Harold was always scared.  
he was easy.  
we had a good time with  
Harold.

we'd pretend to hang him 2 or 3 times  
a week.

we had a rope and we'd  
corner him on the back porch  
of Mrs. Keller's place.  
there was a heavy  
rafter.  
we'd put the rope around  
his neck.

"this time we're gonna do  
it, Harold, we're tired of  
fucking around.  
this time we're *really* going  
to hang you!"

"oh, no! *please!*"

he would cry silently, the  
tears rolling down his stupid  
freckled face.

"stop your damned blubbering!  
now, if you don't want to die either you  
got to drink piss or eat shit!  
which do you want?"

Harold would just keep crying.

“which do you want? answer or  
we’ll hang you now!”

“piss,” he would always say.

then we’d piss on him, all over  
his shoes and his pants, while  
laughing.

then  
when his family finally moved out of  
the neighborhood we set fire to  
Mrs. Gorman’s chicken coop.

## my bully

he was big and he was always after me  
down at the loading dock.

“I’m gonna kick your ass,” he told me.

“listen, Jimmy, there are 50 guys out  
here, why don’t you kick somebody  
else’s ass?”

“no,” he said, “I’m gonna kick *your*  
ass.”

well, I couldn’t blame him.

there was something about me, a  
lot of guys wanted to kick my ass, I’d  
had that problem for years.

maybe I looked easy, maybe it was  
because I was good-natured, liked to  
clown around.

anyhow, I had a problem and it was  
Jimmy, all 230 pounds of him.

it was midweek and we were  
sitting around eating lunch out of our  
brown bags

when Jimmy reached and  
grabbed my sandwich.

“what the fuck is this?” he asked.

he took the sandwich in his  
fist and crushed it into a  
round ball.

then he rolled it on the ground.

“well, hell,” I said, “I’m on a diet,  
anyhow.”

“a diet, huh?” said Jimmy.

he held up a big right hand and

doubled it up.

“maybe you’d like to eat my fist?”

“hey, Jimmy baby, I’m no cannibal.”

“JUST SHUT UP!” he screamed.

I  
shut up.

I don’t know, he just kept after me with his threats and somehow I didn’t feel like I deserved any of it.

then management moved me to a small office on the dock.  
it was Sunday.  
there was nothing to do, I just answered the phone and tried to look wise.

Jimmy was working that Sunday.  
he stood there glaring at me through the glass partition.  
then he began coming toward me.  
I was feeling depressed, I had just split with my shackjob.

Jimmy walked up.  
“come on out of there, I’m going to beat the shit out of you!” he said.

“all right, Jimmy,” I said.  
I came out and moved toward him, thinking,  
I better get in a few shots fast because that’s  
all I’ve got time for.  
he backed off a little and I caught him on  
the nose with the first right.  
his nose moved back into his head and spurted  
red.  
I’m dead now, I thought, and my left caught him  
on the ear.  
I put a right to his belly and it was soft, my fist  
seemed to sink in half a foot.  
Jimmy fell to the ground and held his face and  
began sobbing like a  
girl.

I looked around at the guys.  
“what the fuck,” I said, “this guy is a fake.”

“Jesus,” somebody said.

we all drifted away.  
I went back to the office, sat down.  
after a while Jimmy got up, walked down  
to the end of the loading dock, jumped off, and disappeared  
into the alley.

we never saw him again.

I never really understood what it all meant.

and nobody ever talked about him  
to me again.  
it was like it never  
happened.



fellow runs a bookstore  
I go in there and sign my books for  
him  
and he always forces a book on me  
something about the rough-and-tumble  
life  
but these books are written by  
newspaper  
columnists  
professors, born-into-wealthers,  
etc.  
and these have seen about as much real  
low life  
as a parish priest;  
their lives  
have been about as adventuresome as  
dusting a library  
shelf  
and none of them has ever missed a  
meal.  
these books are well written,  
sometimes clever  
just a touch  
daring  
but there is an overriding sense  
of comfort  
in the writing and in the  
life.  
the books fall from my  
hand.  
this bookstore fellow is  
going to have to think  
of some other means of

rewarding  
me for  
    signing my books  
because reading this nicely  
printed  
    crap  
only reminds me  
once again  
that I am competing only  
against  
    myself.

## the singers

it was a Sunday night. I found a booth,  
ordered a beer and dinner, and waited.  
there were two musicians, a  
man with a guitar and a woman who sang  
with the man as he played.  
they went from table to table, from booth to  
booth, serenading the customers who were  
mostly families with children.  
the songs were popular melodies that I had  
heard many times before and despised.  
it was tired stuff, worn and played to death.  
my dinner was slow in arriving and I ordered  
another beer.  
the singers finished at a table, then turned and  
approached me.  
I raised my hands, waved them off, said,  
“no, no, no!”  
they walked past to the booth behind me and  
began.  
they had wanted to share their  
mediocre music with me  
but I had warded them off.  
I felt quite proud of my quick decision  
to do so.

my dinner arrived and I ate in peace.

ten years ago, maybe even five, I would  
have allowed the singers to descend on  
me, but no longer.

often it takes a lifetime to learn how to  
react to certain critical situations.

it's worth waiting for the arrival of maturity  
and confidence.

try it sometime and see how delightful it  
is to feel powerful and  
alive.

## the march

whenever I hear the *March to the  
Gallows*  
playing on the radio  
I think of her  
in that blue milkmaid's dress  
that showed off her  
figure  
there in Santa Fe.  
it was raining  
the *March* was playing  
the rain was pouring down  
there were even candles  
burning!  
it was a large but  
comfortable  
house  
and I told her what she  
was doing to  
me,  
how much I  
wanted her,  
what a miracle it  
was.  
I was so poor and so  
ugly  
and there I was  
with  
her!  
but I was also a  
fool  
and I loved my  
wine

and I foolishly played the  
foolish drunk as  
the *March* played  
on and on  
in that warm room,  
it would end, then  
play once  
again

I looked over  
and there she was  
on the couch,  
absolutely  
naked,  
milk-  
white.

an astonishing  
frightening  
and riveting  
sight

“I’ll be right there,”  
I said, “just one more  
drink.”

I never made it  
there.

she drove me to the  
airport the  
next day.

some months passed  
and then there was a  
letter from  
her.

*you looked so sad  
on that drive to the airport.  
I've thought of you often.  
I bought a new car,  
bright red, it's silly  
but I can't think of the  
name, you know, who  
made it. it's raining now.  
when it rains here it  
rains like hell, remember?  
oh, I'm gay now.  
we live together, Doreen  
and I. we have some  
terrible arguments but  
basically, I'm happy.  
how are you?*

## the way things are

first they try to break you with grinding  
poverty  
then they try to break you with empty  
fame.

if you will not be broken  
by either  
then there are natural methods  
such as the usual diseases  
followed by an unwelcome  
death.

but most of us are broken long before  
that  
as it's meant to  
be

by earthquake  
flood  
famine  
rage  
suicide  
despair

or simply

by seriously  
burning your nose  
while lighting a  
cigarette.



## words for you

red dogs in green hell, what is this  
divided thing I call  
myself?

what message is this I'm offering  
here?

it's so easy to slide into  
poetic pretension.

almost all art is shot through with  
poetic  
pretension:

painting  
sculpting  
the stage  
music

what is this foolish  
strutting and posturing  
we do?

why do we embroider everything we say  
with special emphasis

when all we really need to do  
is simply say what  
needs to be said?

of course  
the fact is

that there is very little that needs  
to be said.

so we dress up our  
little artful musings  
and clamor for attention  
so that we may appear to be  
a bit more  
important  
or even more  
truthful  
than the others.

what is this I'm writing  
here?

what is this you're  
reading here?

is it no worse than the rest?

probably even a little bit  
better?

## strictly bullshit

now  
there's a *new* one  
going around:  
he is whining and  
telling people  
that  
I  
was responsible  
for him  
not getting  
published  
by  
*The Black Vulture Press.*

there have been  
at least  
three other poets  
who have whined about  
this.

well, luckily, I  
don't have time to  
read unsolicited manuscripts  
or  
advise  
*The Black Vulture Press.*

but  
if I did  
I would have rejected  
all three  
along with  
at least a dozen

other  
dandies  
who would like to  
be published  
there.

that's why I would  
never  
edit or publish  
any  
literary  
gang.

at least  
at the track  
I can bet  
on something  
that won't whine and complain  
and will show me  
some fight  
and  
some run.

## written before I got one

the best writers now  
I'm told  
have

word processors.

I'm not even sure what a  
word processor  
is.

but  
no matter  
the tree roots tangled  
in my mother's bones

no matter  
the shadows in the forgotten  
canyon

no matter  
the dream of the last  
elephant

I'm not getting  
one

whatever it  
is

but  
I hope it helps the best writers  
get better

because I never could read them  
anyhow.

and any boost for them  
major or minor  
will help us  
all.

right?

## straight on

there's nothing quite like driving the  
hairpin curves on the Pasadena Freeway at 85  
m.p.h.  
hung over  
checking the rearview mirror for officers of the  
law  
while peeling and eating tangerines that  
sometimes  
choke you with their  
pulp, acid, seeds  
as  
your eyes fill with tears  
your vision blurs  
and you drive from memory  
and on instinct  
until  
things get clear again.  
finally you reach Santa Anita, that most beautiful race-  
track,  
and glide into the parking lot,  
get  
out, lock it, walk  
in.

being 68 years old feels better than  
30.  
especially 30, that was the most depressing  
birthday: you figured then that the gamble had been  
lost.

what an awful  
mistake you made then

38 years ago, about the time when they built  
the  
Pasadena Freeway.



## remember this

believing what they say or write  
is  
dangerous  
especially if they say or write  
impossibly grand things  
about  
you

and you  
are foolish enough to  
believe them.

you are then apt to smash the  
camera when somebody attempts to  
photograph you in  
public.

or you might get drunk  
at your place  
and shoot through the window  
at your neighbor  
with a  
.44 magnum.

or you could purchase a very  
expensive automobile  
and then become irritated  
with the less wealthy  
in their old cars  
who block your progress  
on the  
freeway.

or you might get married  
too many times  
or have too many  
girlfriends.

or you could go to Europe  
too often  
or get high too  
often.

you could  
abuse  
waiters.

refuse  
autograph  
seekers.

you could even  
kill  
somebody.

or  
in a thousand  
other ways  
you could even finally  
kill  
yourself.

many  
do.

now see here

playing with words as the mind fries and  
pops like an egg left unattended in the  
pan  
while my cat crawls into a large paper bag  
turns around  
within and  
looks out at me.

my woman is out tonight doing something  
social.

I used to mind  
I no longer mind.

if she can find pleasure  
out there  
I would say that  
the world is better for  
that.

the radio music is not very good  
tonight  
as I play with these words  
as

I now  
stare at  
a red package of

50 white  
envelopes.

what happened to those nights, man,  
when you used to rip off poem after  
poem?

oh shut up, I answer myself,  
I don't feel at *all* like examining the  
past, the present or the  
future.

o.k., my brain says, I'm going on  
strike too.

as my cat crawls out of the  
paper bag  
it's

a fairly slow night here.

## little poem

little sun little moon little dog  
and a little to eat and a little to love  
and a little to live for

in a little room  
filled with little  
mice  
who gnaw and dance and run while I sleep  
waiting for a little death  
in the middle of a little morning

in a little city  
in a little state  
my little mother dead  
my little father dead  
in a little cemetery somewhere.

I have only  
a little time  
to tell you this:

watch out for  
little death when he comes running

but like all the billions of little deaths  
it will finally mean nothing and everything:

all your little tears burning like the dove,  
wasted.

## part 4

real  
loneliness  
is not  
necessarily  
limited to  
when  
you are  
alone.



## Gertrude up the stairway, 1943

I think of Gertrude walking up that St. Louis  
stairway  
so many years ago  
and myself just behind her  
still almost a boy.

I think of Gertrude walking up that St. Louis  
stairway  
and never a stairway as taut with promise as  
that one  
with the landlady's pictures of Jesus  
torn from cheap magazines  
plastered here and there along the  
walls.

I think of myself walking up that St. Louis  
stairway  
behind Gertrude  
and into her room  
going in there  
the door closed firmly behind us  
her pouring the claret  
into tall thin glasses  
in that dreary roominghouse  
near that very large park  
with its leafless trees of winter.  
standing there  
Gertrude seemed so lovely  
so perfect  
a girl beyond mere girlhood  
a figure wrapped in a perfect  
dream  
and as  
she stood there before me  
she was finally



too perfect:  
I downed my claret and begged my  
leave  
knowing that  
following Gertrude up that St. Louis  
stairway  
was enough in  
itself  
it was  
our one great moment together  
and all that followed  
would be  
less  
less  
and I wanted to remember her like  
that: perfect in the moment  
before she wearied of the game and  
we of each  
other.

## where was I?

I didn't know where I came  
from or where I was  
going.  
I was lost.  
I used to sit  
in strange doorways  
for hours,  
not thinking  
not moving  
until I was asked  
to move.

I don't mean that I was an  
idiot or a  
fool.  
what I mean is that  
I was  
uninterested.

I didn't care if you intended  
to kill me.  
I wouldn't stop you.

I was living an existence that  
meant nothing to  
me.

I found places to stay.  
small rented rooms. bars. jails.  
sleep and indifference seemed  
the only  
possibilities.

all else seemed  
nonsense.

once I sat all night long and looked  
out at the Mississippi River.  
I don't know why.  
the river ran by and  
all I remember is that it  
stank.

I always seemed to be  
on a cross-country  
bus  
traveling  
somewhere.  
looking out a dirty  
window at  
nothing at  
all.

I always knew exactly how much  
money I was  
carrying.  
for example:  
a five and two ones  
in my wallet  
and a nickel, a dime and  
two pennies in my right  
front pocket.

I had no desire to speak  
to anybody nor to be  
spoken to.

I was looked upon as a  
misfit and a  
freak.  
I ate very little food but  
I was amazingly  
strong.  
once, working in a factory  
the young boys, the bruisers,  
were trying to lift a heavy  
piece of machinery from the  
floor.  
they all failed.

“hey, Hank, try it!” they  
laughed.

I walked over, lifted it,  
put it down,  
went back to  
work.

I gained their respect  
for some reason  
but I didn't want  
it.

at times I would pull down  
the shades in my room  
and stay in bed for a  
week or more.

I was on a strange journey  
but it was

meaningless.  
I had no ideas.  
I had no plan.  
I slept.  
I just slept  
and I waited.

I wasn't lonely.  
I experienced no self-pity.  
I was just caught up in a  
life in which  
I could find no  
meaning.

then I was  
a young man a  
thousand years old.

and now I am an old man  
waiting to be born.

## sloppy day

I had been up until 3 a.m. the night before.  
heavy drinking: beer, vodka, wine  
and there I was at the track  
on a Sunday.  
it was hot.  
everybody was there.  
the killers, the insane, the fools.  
the disciples of Jesus Christ.  
the lovers of Mickey Mouse.  
there were 50,000 of them.  
the track was giving away  
free caps  
and 45,000 of those people were  
wearing caps  
and there weren't enough seats  
and the crappers were crowded  
and during the races  
the people screamed so loud  
that you couldn't hear the  
track announcer over the loudspeaker and  
the lines were so long  
it took you  
20 minutes to lay a bet and  
between running to the crapper  
and trying to bet  
it was a day you  
would rather begin  
all over again  
someplace else  
but it was too late now and  
there were elbows and assholes every-  
where and  
all the women looked vicious and ugly and

all the men looked stupid and ugly  
and suddenly  
I got a vision of  
the whole mass of them copulating  
in the infield  
like death fucking death,  
stinking and stale;  
they were walking all around  
belching, farting  
bumping into each other  
gasping  
losing  
lost  
hating the dream  
for not coming  
true.

then  
some fat son of a bitch with  
a pink pig's head perched  
on his body  
came rushing up to me  
(why?)  
and while  
I pretended to be looking away  
and as he closed in  
I dug my elbow into his gut.  
I felt it sink in like he was  
a sack of dirty  
laundry.

“mother,” he gasped,  
help . . .”

“you all right, buddy?” I  
asked.

he looked as if  
he was going to puke.  
his mouth opened.  
he cupped his hand  
and a pair of  
yellow-and-pink false teeth  
fell into his palm.

I walked on through the crowd  
and found a betting line.  
I decided to bet the last 5 races  
and leave.  
the only way I would stay  
would be for \$900 an hour  
tax free.

20 minutes later  
I had made my bets  
and I walked out to the parking lot  
and to my car.  
I got in  
opened the window and  
took off my shoes.

then I noticed  
that I was blocked in.  
some guy had parked behind me  
in the exit aisle.

I started my engine



put it in reverse and  
jammed my bumper against him.  
he had his hand brake on  
but luckily he was in neutral and  
I slowly ground him back up against  
another car.  
now the other car wouldn't be able  
to get out.

what made that son of a bitch  
do that?  
didn't he have any  
consideration?

I put my shoes on  
got out  
and let the air out of his  
left front tire.

no good.  
he probably had a spare.  
so I let the air out of his  
left rear tire  
got back into my car and  
maneuvered it out of there  
with great difficulty.

it felt good to  
drive out of that racetrack.  
it sure as hell felt better than  
my first piece of ass and

most of the other pieces  
which followed.

I got to the freeway and  
turned the radio on and  
the man told me  
I had just won  
the first of my 5 bets.  
the horse paid \$12.40.  
at ten-win that was  
\$52 profit so  
I wasn't on skid row  
yet.

by the time  
I got to my driveway  
the man on the radio told me  
that my next horse had  
run out.  
they had sent in a \$75 long shot.  
too bad.

I parked in the garage  
climbed out  
put my key in the front door  
kicked it open  
got my blade out: over 50%  
of home burglaries occur during the  
day.  
I checked the immediate  
visible area

walked into the bathroom  
pulled back the shower curtain:  
nothing.

I walked out  
stood in the front room  
and then I heard a sound  
in the kitchen  
and I yelled,  
“O.K., FUCKER, COME ON OUT AND  
WE’LL SEE WHO’S BEST!”

there was no answer.

“ALL RIGHT, FUCKER, I’M COMING  
IN!”

I ran into the kitchen with my  
blade extended.

my cat was sitting up on the  
breadboard.  
he looked at me, amazed, then leaped off  
and zoomed out of the kitchen.

I walked into the bedroom and  
switched on the tube.  
the Rams and Lions were  
playing.  
I kicked my shoes off, stretched out  
on the bed, said, “shit.”  
got up again, went downstairs,  
cracked a beer, came up, let the

bathwater run and  
stretched out on the bed again.

the QB took the ball  
dropped back  
looked downfield to pass and  
didn't see the big lineman  
breaking in  
from his left.  
the lineman blindsided the QB  
like a trash collection truck.

the QB was making \$2 million a year  
and he earned much of it  
on that play.

he didn't get up.  
he couldn't.  
he didn't want to.

I could have been a football  
player  
only my father, that son of a  
bitch, said that a man went to  
school to study,  
not play.

I flipped off the tv  
disrobed and  
walked into the bathroom.  
I turned off the water  
tested it with my hand.

nothing like a hot bath  
in a cold world.  
I got in  
stretched out,  
the 230 pounds of me  
pushing the water  
through the emergency drain.

son of a bitch,  
why did they build  
5-foot bathtubs  
in a world of  
6-foot people?

nobody knew anything  
and they certainly weren't getting  
any smarter.

## note on the telephone

often while I am up here  
at the keyboard until 3 a.m.  
or so  
my wife gets on the telephone  
downstairs  
and conducts marathon  
conversations  
with her sister or her  
niece  
or somebody.  
and as classical music  
soothes my battered brain  
and my fingers work  
the keyboard  
my wife works out  
in her own way  
on the telephone  
discussing  
for hours  
whatever needs  
to be  
discussed.  
some seem to need this  
kind of intercourse.  
their very souls  
seem to be  
nourished  
by an endless wave  
of  
babble.

me, I'm just not a  
telephone  
person.

for me  
it goes mostly  
like this:  
“sure. how are  
you?  
everything's  
fine.  
see you  
later . . .”

I used to take  
my telephone off  
the hook  
for days at  
a time.  
once I took  
the damn  
thing apart and stuffed the  
bell and the  
bell-ringer with  
rags.  
then I pissed on  
it.

I believe  
there's something  
about the disembodied human  
voice that

is not  
reassuring.

you tell that to my wife  
downstairs now and  
she'll smile and say,  
"have it your way!"

strange, isn't it?  
how two such different people can  
live under the same  
roof

like  
that.



## at the edge

a smoky room at the edge, it's always  
been a smoky room at the  
edge.  
the edge never goes away.  
sometimes you understand it  
better,  
sometimes you even talk to it, you might  
say, "hello, old friend,"  
but it has no sense of humor, it slams you in the  
gut, says,  
"this is a serious business, I'm here to  
kill you or drive you mad."  
"all right," you reply, "I under-  
stand."

tonight this room is smoky  
and I am alone  
listening to the silence.  
I am tired of waiting on life,  
it was so slow to arrive and so quick to  
leave.  
the streets and the cities are  
empty,  
love is on the damned cross  
and death laughs in the back  
room.

at the edge, the edge, the edge.

it's so sad: the flowers are still trying  
to please me,  
the sun shouts my name,  
but my courage fails

as the animals look on with large  
eyes.

this smoky room.  
a stained rug.  
a few books.  
a painting or two.  
a broken chair.  
an empty pair of shoes.  
a tired old man.

subordinated debt.

heads without faces,  
seen in all the places

to go mad, to suicide or to  
continue?

sitting here now is  
ridiculously perfect: there's  
nothing to compare it  
with.

a palsied past and a short  
future.

on days like this  
one can be depressed by  
the message in a fortune  
cookie.

November creeps in on all fours  
like a leper.

there still might be a place  
for us  
somewhere.

it's not the doing  
it's the waiting.

it's not the waiting  
it's the waste.

it's not the waste  
it's the durability of  
the waste.

one who thus believes,  
concedes.

## coming awake

yawning and stretching,  
putting on a clean pair of underwear  
and thinking,  
you are not in jail and you don't have  
cancer  
but there are probably a few people out there  
who would like to murder you but they  
probably won't actually come and do  
it.  
you think about how  
you once decided to be buried  
near Hollywood Park  
so you could hear the horses pound by  
as you slept  
but lately they've talked about  
moving Hollywood Park elsewhere  
because the neighborhood has gotten  
so poor  
so now you must live longer  
until you learn where they plan to  
relocate.  
putting on your shirt and pants  
you remember that  
you are being taught in some  
contemporary literature courses  
and you fart as you walk down  
the stairway.  
strange thoughts are much like  
hangovers: you feel better  
without them.

then you wonder if there's any coffee left as  
you open the front door and look out  
to see if your car has been  
stolen.

## the simple truth

you just don't know how to do it,  
you know that,  
and you can't do a lot of other  
useful things either.  
it's the fault of the  
way you were raised,  
some of it,  
and you'll never learn now,  
it's too late.

you just can't do certain things.  
I could show you how to do them  
but you still wouldn't do them  
right.

I learned how to do a lot of necessary things  
when I was a little girl  
and I can still do them now.

I had good parents but  
your parents never gave you enough  
attention or love  
so you never learned how to do  
certain simple things.

I know it's not your fault but  
I think you should be aware of how  
limited you are.

here, let me do that!  
now watch me!  
see how easy it is!  
take your time!  
you have no patience!

now look at you!  
you're mad, aren't you?

I can tell.  
you think I can't tell?

I'm going downstairs now,  
my favorite tv program is coming  
on.

and don't be mad because  
I tell you the simple truth about  
yourself.

do you want anything from  
downstairs?  
a snack?  
no?

are you sure?



## here and now

there are days  
when it all goes  
wrong.

on the freeway  
at home  
in the super-  
market  
and everywhere  
else

continual  
uninterrupted  
ferocious  
haphazard  
assaults  
on what  
is left of  
your  
sanity and  
sensibilities.

the gods first  
play with you  
and then  
play  
against  
you.

your nerves  
simmer until they're  
raw.

no philosophical  
shield  
will protect you,  
no amount of wisdom is  
good enough.

you're hung out  
as quarry  
for the  
dogs and  
the  
masses;  
the breakdown  
of the  
machinery  
and all  
reason  
is  
total.

then  
there's always  
—suddenly—  
a bright  
smiling face  
with dim  
eyes, some  
half-stranger  
shouting  
loudly:  
*“hey, how ya  
doing?”*

the face  
all too close,  
you see each  
blemish and  
pore in the  
skin,  
the loose  
mouth is  
like a broken  
rotten  
peach.

your only  
thought  
being,  
shall I kill  
him?

but then  
you say,  
“everything’s  
fine.  
how about  
you?”

and you  
walk on past,  
and the goat-  
faced  
half-stranger  
is left  
behind

as the sun  
blazes down  
through  
acid  
clouds.

you move  
on  
as the gods  
laugh and  
laugh  
and  
laugh,  
you put one  
foot  
before the  
other,  
you swing your  
arms  
as the rusty  
bell does  
not ring,  
as inside your  
head  
the blood  
turns to  
jello.

but  
this day will end  
this life will end  
the vultures will

finally  
fly  
away.

please  
hurry, hurry,  
hurry.

## crazy world

fellow mailed me a knife in the mail.  
said it was a gift in appreciation of my  
work.

the knife has a lever on the side,  
slide it and the blade shoots  
out and you're ready,  
fast.

I doubt if I'll ever use this weapon  
but it's nice to have a reader who is that  
concerned for my  
safety.

but really, I prefer readers who mail me  
bottles of wine  
even if some of them arrive  
broken.

still, you should never drink anything  
sent through the mails from an unknown  
individual, somebody might try to poison  
you.

but anything is preferable to the reader who  
arrives in person at the door.

this truly upsets and angers me.  
in this world, even minor fame can be a  
major problem.

anyhow, I'm now using the knife the reader  
sent me to clean my fingernails.

better this than ripping it deep into  
somebody's guts.

I prefer to do that with the  
poem.

## good stuff

Red had a job cleaning rooming  
houses  
and he often brought me the  
relics of the dead.  
“nobody wanted his stuff. look  
at this shirt. you can’t buy a  
shirt like this anymore.  
and try on these glasses.”

“thanks, Red.”

“here, try on this robe. look at  
that god-damned thing. ever seen  
anything like it?”

“no, no, I haven’t.”

“he died Tuesday. try it on.”

I tried it on.  
it was thick like a bed quilt—  
heavy, and yellow and green.  
I tightened the belt.

“it’s too big for you but  
it looks good. he was a big  
guy. I knew him well. he worked as a  
janitor and drank malt beer.”

“thanks, Red, I can use this.”

“need any stockings? underwear?”

“no, I’m all right there.”

Red left to go clean more  
rooms.

•

that big robe was like something that  
kings wore in the old days.  
I really liked it, I’d never seen  
anything like it in the stores.  
it must have been passed down from generation  
to generation.

my new girlfriend came over that  
night and we sat around drinking.  
I was still at the stage where I was  
trying to impress her.  
so after drinking a couple of beers  
I told her, “I’ll be right back.”

I went into the bedroom and put on the  
robe and then walked out with my drink  
in my hand.

“Jesus Christ, what’s that?”

“this, my dear, is class!”

“it’s too big and it’s  
filthy! where did you get  
it?”



“some guy died and they were going to throw it away.”

I sat down next to her.

“it stinks!”

“there’s nothing wrong with death,” I told her, “there is nothing shameful about death.”

I decided not to show her the shirt.  
or my new pair of reading  
glasses.

we didn’t make love that night.

•

the next time Red came by he had a pair of leather gloves.

“this guy died last Friday. he worked in a box factory. his relatives came by and cleaned the place out. but they forgot these. I found them on the closet floor.”

I put them on.  
they were a little small but they were like new, just a tiny hole in the tip of one finger, left hand.

“thanks, Red, they’re beautiful!”

“you can’t get gloves like that any more.”

“yes,” I told him, “don’t I know it?”

## respite

fighting with women  
playing the horses  
drinking

sometimes I get too exhausted  
to even feel bad

it's then that  
listening to the radio  
or reading a newspaper  
is soothing,  
comforting

the toilet looks kind  
the bathtub looks kind  
the faucets and the sink  
look kind

I feel this way tonight

the sound of an airplane overhead  
warms me  
voices outside are  
gentle and kind.

now I am content and  
unashamed.

I watch my cigarette smoke  
work up through the lamp shade  
and all the people I have wronged  
have forgiven me

but I know that I will go mad  
again—  
disgusted  
frenzied  
sick.

I need good nights like this  
in between.  
you need them too.

without them  
no bridge would be  
walkable.

## the horse player

I've been watching them for decades.  
the jocks change but the horses  
look about the same.  
the mutuel clerks change, the parking lot attendants change  
but the tracks do not.  
I have seen two riders killed, half a hundred horses break  
down.  
I have had horses pay over \$300 and less than \$2.80.  
I've seen them run in downpours  
and in fog so thick that the announcer couldn't make the call.  
I've bet on thoroughbreds, quarter horses, harness nags,  
even the dogs.  
I've watched them in Mexico and America and in Europe.  
I've met women at the track and I've left women at the track.  
I've attempted to make a living at the track and if you want  
stress, there it is.  
once I spent 3 months living near the track at different motels,  
sitting  
alone in the bars at night.  
I've had a half dozen winning systems and a half dozen losing  
ones but, at the time, I couldn't tell which was  
which.  
finally I quit  
with my tail between my legs, got a job and played  
the horses on the side.

I have wasted a lifetime at the racetrack  
and to this moment, I still go every day.  
I don't know any other place to go.  
the toteboard flashes and I move in.  
I have no idea what I am looking for or what I expect to  
find.

I speak to nobody.

I sit with my latest system and wait for the next  
race.

what else can I do?

## displaced

burning in hell  
this piece of me fits in nowhere  
as other people find things  
to do  
with their time  
places to go  
with one another  
things to say  
to each other.

I am  
burning in hell  
some place north of Mexico.  
flowers don't grow here.

I am not like  
other people  
other people are like  
other people.

they are all alike:  
joining  
grouping  
huddling  
they are both  
gleeful and content  
and I am  
burning in hell.

my heart is a thousand years old.

I am not like  
other people.

I'd die on their picnic grounds  
smothered by their flags  
slugged by their songs  
unloved by their soldiers  
gored by their humor  
murdered by their concern.

I am not like  
other people.  
I am  
burning in hell.

the hell of  
myself.



## in search of a hero

as far as literature is concerned,  
for a while, it was Hemingway, then I  
noticed that his writing was imitating itself, he was  
not really writing anymore.

as far as sex is concerned,  
I began quite late and being fully rested  
I gave it a roaring start, learning more from each woman  
and applying it in all its fulsome aspects to the next, awakening  
in strange bed after strange bed (and then back in some old  
beds) looking out the window in the morning to check  
on my car parked outside—and remembering that there was  
another woman for later that day and maybe even another one that  
night.

dinners, lunches, walks in the park,  
walks by the sea, sometimes unexpectedly a brother,  
a son, an ex-husband and, once, a current husband.  
I knew of nobody with as many girlfriends as I had  
who was drinking as hard at the same time.

I was penniless and stupid  
and almost without reason.

I'd return now and then to my tiny dirty room  
to find wild notes under  
my door and in the mailbox from  
anxious females.

I had no time to respond and some then became  
enraged,

trashing my automobile, breaking into my  
room, destroying everything in sight, female  
hurricanes from hell.

and the phone rang without pause throughout  
all this carnage, curses, wails, hang-ups, callbacks,

threats of love, threats of death, and if I took  
the phone off the hook for a bit, soon the sound of  
a racing motor, the screeching of brakes  
and then a rock thrown through the window.  
3 times there was an attempted murder  
despite the fact that  
I was old and ugly, worse than poor,  
often without even toilet paper in  
the bathroom. but somehow  
in my demented state  
I became my own hero.

I'd go into Black bars,  
I'd go into biker bars,  
I'd go drunk into Mexican bars,  
I'd go anywhere,  
I'd spit into the eye of God and  
even into the face of the devil.  
then I'd wake up somewhere  
with someone new  
in the morning  
and the sun would be  
shining  
as if for me alone.

I bought the cheapest junk cars  
off the lots  
and drove them to Caliente, to  
Mexico,  
the woman saying,  
"Jesus, you're driving this thing  
like a maniac!"

I'd squander my meager dollars at the race  
track  
with bravado  
as if all the gods were  
on my side.

it all ended  
some place, somewhere,  
in a small  
room in downtown L.A.  
I was there with this beautiful  
girl with long hair, so  
young, such a fine body, such  
long long hair, it was almost all  
too much. I think it began  
in a bar downstairs or around  
the corner and it was  
arranged that I was to have  
sex with this child of  
unbelievable beauty  
but there  
was also a large heavy Mexican  
woman there, even  
uglier than I and I turned to her  
and said, "you can leave the  
room now."

"I stay," she said. "I make sure  
you not hurt her."

Christ, she was ugly.  
the cheap flowers on  
the wallpaper bloomed and

blossomed at me.  
I wanted the obvious to be  
obvious.

I looked at the ugly woman.  
“I don’t want her,” I heard myself say,  
“I want you.”

“huh?”

“I’m going to fuck *you!*”

I rushed at her,  
noticing at the same  
time that the beautiful girl on  
the bed was not moving, was not interested,  
was not saying anything.

the big woman was  
stronger than I,  
she fought me off,  
it was a  
battle, I reached for her  
breast,  
I tried to kiss her  
wretched  
mouth  
but she was full of  
refried beans and  
good  
old-fashioned strength,  
we banged against the  
dresser,

spun around,  
she shoved me away,  
I crashed against the wall,  
she rushed at me  
and swung a heavy arm at  
the end of which was attached  
a metal claw I  
had not noticed.  
no hand, just this gleaming,  
metallic, dangerous  
claw.  
I ducked under the claw  
and she swung again.  
I leaped aside and  
ran to the door to find  
it shut tight.  
I ducked under the swinging  
claw once more.  
you have no idea how it  
glinted, glinted in the  
cheap light that  
illuminated that heartless  
room.  
I flung open the door and  
ran down the stairway  
and she chased me down.  
and I ran out into the street,  
I ran and I ran  
and when I looked around  
she was gone.  
and then luckily for me,  
unlike so many other nights,  
elsewhere and everywhere,

I remembered  
exactly where I had parked  
my car.

the albatross is a fake,  
the universe is a shoe,  
there are no heroes,  
there is only a mouse  
in the corner  
blinking its eyes,  
there is only a corner  
with a blinking mouse,  
two toads embrace  
what's left of the sun  
as the monkey  
manages a tired  
smile.

## escapade

the end of grace, the end of what matters.  
the eye at the bottom of the bottle  
is ours  
winking back.  
old voices, old songs are a  
snake which crawls  
away.

men go mad looking into empty faces.  
why not?  
what else is there for them to do?  
I have done it.

the eye at the bottom of the bottle  
winks back.  
it's all a trick.  
everything is an illusion.  
there must be something better somewhere.  
but where?  
not here.  
not there.

slowly one crawls toward imbecility,  
welcoming it like a lost  
lover.

I weary of this contest with myself  
but it's the only sport in  
town.

## burning, burning

a dismal god-damned night, the birds are limp  
on the wire, the cats asleep on their backs,  
legs stuck up into the lifeless  
air. the homeless are still  
homeless as a bell rings in my head  
and  
on the radio a man  
shoves a Spanish rhapsody by Liszt  
at me like an insult.  
then, that's over and I'm told that eventually  
something by Bach will be along if I manage to  
stay awake.  
as if to help, boat horns now blast from the  
harbor.  
if it weren't so hot tonight those things would all  
fit together but instead  
there's a madness in the air.

letter from a fellow from England today, he writes  
that I am one of the few people he  
admires.  
well, he hasn't met me personally.

and, something else: there are no daring lives anymore,  
none at all.  
the only daring activity left is when  
we kill.  
and I'm not preaching or suggesting.  
I'm simply telling you how  
it is.

I get cranky in the heat, drink too much, smoke bits  
of old cigars, pull at my left ear, scratch my



arms, think of bellybuttons, tombstones, cacti,  
watchesprings, other oddities.

well, look, here's Bach and I'm still awake.  
I need another reason to stay in this room full of ghosts,  
some of them my own.  
it could be worse, it will be.

nights like this. stuck here. grim reality  
belches, more  
boat horns blow.  
the years hang strangled. I  
burn my hand with a match.

the dream lies huddled, muddy.

confusion and sanctity reign.

effortless, painful, obnoxious, beautiful nights  
like this. lives  
like this.

there's too much to say, the dead  
laugh as Bach enters  
making palaces of sound, I can't stand it and yes  
I can.

upon reading an interview with a best-selling  
novelist in our metropolitan daily newspaper

he talks like he writes  
and he has a face like a dove, untouched by  
externals.  
a little shiver of horror runs through me as I read  
about  
his comfortable assured success.  
“I am going to write an important novel next year,” he says.  
next year?  
I skip some paragraphs  
but the interview goes on for two and one-half pages  
more.  
it’s like milk spilled on a tablecloth, it’s as soothing as  
talcum powder, it’s the bones of an eaten fish, it’s a damp  
stain on a faded necktie, it’s a gathering hum.  
this man is very fortunate that he is not standing  
in line at a soup kitchen.  
this man has no concept of failure because he is  
paid so well for it.  
I am lying on the bed, reading.  
I drop the paper to the floor.  
then I hear a sound.  
it is a small fly buzzing.  
I watch it flying, circling the room in an irregular  
pattern.  
  
life at last.

## nothing to it

“now,” said the doctor, “I am going to explain the entire procedure to you so you don’t worry. we’re going to run a little tube down into your lungs. there’s a light on the end and we’re going to look around. also there is a little clipper attached and it will take a snip here and there and bring some samples back so we can have them analyzed. the tubes are lubricated and slide right in. we enter one nostril, go down through the throat and into the lung. would you prefer we go in the left or the right nostril?”

“the left,” I said.

“the left? fine. now we want you on your back. but first, maybe you’d like to look at the tubes?”

“no,” I said.

“the whole procedure will be complete in from ten to fifteen minutes. we’re going to have a little look, take a little snip, the tubes are lubricated, there’s nothing to it.”

I glanced at the tubes. they looked like battery cables.

“nurse,” said the doctor.

“yes?” I said.

“no,” said the doctor, “I was calling the nurse.”

“sorry,” I said.

then I was on my back and two intent masked faces were bending over me.

I had been on my way to the racetrack.

it was already past noon.

I was definitely going to miss the first post.

## this place

twenty-five thousand fools  
lined up for a free hamburger  
at the racetrack today and  
got it.

in 1889  
Vincent entered a  
mental asylum in  
St. Remy.

1564: Michelangelo, Vesalius,  
Calvin die; Shakespeare, Marlowe,  
Galileo  
born.

caught a flounder yesterday,  
cooked it  
today.

midst the din of this  
imperfect life  
a blinding flash of  
light  
tonight:  
when I let the  
6 cats in  
it was so  
perfectly  
beautiful  
that  
for a  
moment  
I

turned away  
and faced the east  
wall.

A.D. 701–762

these dark nights  
I begin to feel like  
the Chinese poet  
Li Po:  
drinking wine and writing  
poems  
writing poems and drinking  
wine

all the while  
aware of the strict limitations  
that come with  
being  
human

then  
accepting that

the wine and the poems  
gently  
intermixing:

yes, there is a peaceable place  
to be found  
in this unending  
war  
we call life

where  
things  
such as  
light, shadow, sound  
objects

become  
gently  
and meaningfully  
fascinating.

Li Po  
drunk on his  
wine  
knew very well that  
just to know  
one thing well  
was  
best.



## regrets of a sort

I've written all these poems  
just using the words  
I know  
even when my writing sometimes  
became almost like  
listening to your  
neighbor  
over the  
backyard fence.

but I do like  
the music of language:  
the curl of the unexpected  
word  
the sensation  
of a  
tasty  
almost never-used  
near-virgin  
word.

there are so many  
of them.

at times  
I read the dictionary  
marveling  
at the immensity of  
that untouched  
backlog.

there's a force  
there

that properly exploited  
would make  
all I've written  
seem  
terribly simple.

yet  
when I consider  
the many poets  
who have delved into this immense  
backlog:

the educated  
the cultured  
the  
all-knowing

it  
doesn't appear to have  
worked  
very well  
for them.  
perhaps have they  
chosen  
the wrong  
words?  
for the wrong  
reasons?

or without  
taste?  
or the need to  
communicate?

whatever,  
the users  
of exotic words  
have discouraged me  
from trying to use my  
vocabulary  
as if it was  
a shield  
for pretenders.

and so  
for the moment  
for now  
I am caught  
with this  
left with  
this

and since you  
have come with me  
this  
far

so  
are you.

## too young

I worked for a while in a picture frame factory where my job was to hand-sand the wood before it was assembled and painted.

another man sat at a machine and he ran the wood through and chopped it into various lengths.

he worked the cutting blade by stamping down on a lever with his right foot.

I watched him for several days, then I walked up to him.

“Jesus Christ, is that all you do?

I mean, just pump your foot up and down for 8 hours?

doesn't that drive you crazy?”

the man didn't reply and I went back to my hand-sanding.

after that the other workers didn't speak to me.

one week later the boss called me into his office.

“we are going to have to let you go.”

he wrote out my check and I took it and walked out of there.

outside as I walked along I felt  
good, I felt that I understood something  
very special.

about a month later  
it was past midnight  
and I was attempting to sleep  
in a flophouse  
alongside 35 or 40 men  
on cots and  
most of them were moaning  
or snoring  
loudly.

I still felt that I knew  
something very special  
which shows you  
how little I really knew  
at that particular  
time.

## listening to the radio at 1:35 a.m.

I switch the station:  
a man plays the piano in grand  
fashion.

somewhere else  
there are nice homes  
on the ocean shore  
where you can  
take your drink  
out on the veranda  
and  
stand at ease and  
watch the waves  
listen to the waves  
crashing in the dark  
and yet  
at the same time  
you can feel crappy there  
too

just like me now  
having a dog fight  
fighting for my life  
within these 4 walls  
20 miles inland.

## unclassical symphony

the cat murdered  
in the middle of the street

tire-crushed

now it is nothing

and neither are  
we

as  
we  
look  
away.

## dinner for free

I was an unknown starving writer when I met this beautiful lady who was young, educated, rich. I really can't remember how it all came about. she had come by my destroyed apartment a few times for brief visits. "I don't want sex," she told me. "I want you to understand that right from the start." "o.k.," I said, "no sex."

one night she invited me to dinner (her treat). she arrived in her new Porsche and we drove off.

the table was in front, it was a fancy place, and there was a fellow with a violin and a fellow at the piano.

I ordered wine and then we ordered dinner. it was quiet. too early for the music, I guessed. it was good red wine.

the wine went quickly and I ordered another bottle.

"tell me about your writing," she said.

"no, no," I said.

the dinner arrived. I had ordered a porterhouse steak and fries. she had something delicate. I don't remember what it was. we began eating.

she started talking. it began easily enough. something about an art exhibit. I nodded her on.

being an unknown starving writer it didn't take me very long to clean my plate.



she began talking about the life of Mozart, slowly putting small morsels of food into her mouth.

I poured more red wine.

then she started talking about saving the American Indian from him/her self.

I quickly ordered another bottle of wine.

the waiter took our plates and she began pouring her own wine and tossing it down.

she told me that Immanuel Kant had a most brilliant mind, astonishingly brilliant.

as we sat her voice got louder and louder. she spoke more and more rapidly.

then the guy at the piano started playing and the guy with the violin joined in.

she raised her voice even more to be heard over the music.

she was back to saving the American Indian from him/her self.

I began getting a headache. as I sat and listened to her my headache got worse.

she began to explain what Jean Paul Sartre really meant.

the guy at the piano and the guy with the violin began to play louder and louder to be heard over her.

finally I waved my arms at her and yelled, "LOOK, LET'S GO  
BACK TO MY  
PLACE!"

she paid the bill and I got her out of there. she talked all the way back to my place. we parked and went in.

I had some scotch. I poured the scotch. I sat on the couch and she sat on a chair across the room, talking loudly and rapidly.

she was talking about Vivaldi, on and on about Vivaldi.

then she stopped to light a cigarette and I spoke.

"look," I told her, "I really don't want to fuck you."

she jumped up, knocked over her drink, began prancing around the room. "oh, hahaha! I *know* you really want to fuck me!"

then she went into some type of energetic dance, holding her cigarette over her head. she was very awkward, breathing heavily and staring at me in a peculiar way.

"I have a headache," I told her. "I just want to go to bed and to sleep."

"haha! you're trying to trick me into your bed!"

then she sat down and looked at me, still breathing heavily.

“I’m not going to let you fuck me!”

“please don’t,” I said.

“tell me about your writing,” she said.

“look,” I said, “will you please just get out of here and leave me alone?”

“ha!” she jumped up.

“ha! you men are all alike! all you think about is *fucking!*”

“I don’t have the slightest desire to fuck you,” I said.

“ha! you expect me to *believe* that?”

she grabbed her purse, ran to the door. then she was out the door, slamming it behind her.

and just like that, my beautiful, young, rich, educated lady was gone.

## a song from the 70's

Hank, about the voices I hear, they talk to me whenever I get in a medication jam like I'm in now; I'm out of Valium and can't get any until tomorrow.

I'm supposed to take Navane twice a day, one at breakfast and one at bedtime plus three Desyrel, one in the morning and two in the evening plus 15 mg. of Valium a day, one tab usually around 9 in the morning, one at 2 in the afternoon, one at 5 and one before I go to sleep but I like to get high and usually take 3 at a time.

I ran across a couple of old prescriptions for codeine and Percodan last week and I took 40 codeines and 20 Percodans in 6 days. because I was loaded I thought I threw the Percodan prescription into the dumpster and scrounged around in there for 30 minutes before I discovered I had hidden it in my underwear so my mother wouldn't find it.

I fell out of bed a few weeks ago and there was this terrible black-and-blue mark on my leg near my butt, so my mother made me go to the Emergency Ward at Presbyterian Hospital and a young intern there drew a circle around the mark with a felt pen and gave me 30 tabs of Percodan and a synthetic morphine shot, then I went to see my internist and he looked at the black-and-blue mark with the circle drawn around it and he wrote another prescription for 40 more codeines.

I say legalize drugs for Christ's sake, and bring back Country Joe and the Fish!

it dissolves, it all dissolves: those we thought  
were great, so exceptional—they dissolve;  
even the cat  
walking across the rug vanishes in a  
puff of smoke;  
nations break apart at the seams  
and overnight become  
tenth-rate powers;  
the .330 hitter can no longer  
see the ball, he dips to .188,  
sits apart on the bench,  
wonders about  
the remainder of his life;  
the heavyweight champ is knocked senseless by  
a 40-to-one underdog;  
it dissolves, it all dissolves—  
lovers leave and  
old cars break down  
on the freeway at rush hour;  
I look at a photo of myself  
and think,  
who's that  
awkward  
foolish  
old man?  
it dissolves—the nights of hurricane and  
hunger  
have turned  
placid;  
I search for a partial set of my teeth  
on the bookcase  
shelf;  
and I can't even think of

a last line  
for this poem;  
sometimes  
before his death  
a man can see  
his  
ghost.

## war some of the time

when you write a poem it  
needn't be intense  
it  
can be nice and  
easy  
and you shouldn't necessarily  
be  
concerned only with things like anger or  
love or need;  
at any moment the  
greatest accomplishment might be to simply  
get  
up and tap the handle  
on that leaking toilet;  
I've  
done that twice now while typing  
this  
and now the toilet is  
quiet.  
to  
solve simple problems: that's  
the most  
satisfying thing, it  
gives you a chance and it  
gives everything else a chance  
too.

we were made to accomplish the easy  
things  
and made to live through the things that are  
hard.

at last

I am sitting here  
in darkest night  
as one more poem  
arrives  
and says  
wait,  
*wait,*  
watch me as I strut  
across the page  
letter by letter  
like one of your  
cats  
walking across the  
hood of your  
car.  
watch me,  
here I  
go  
again  
all the way to  
Mexico  
or Java  
or down  
into your  
gut.  
wait  
some  
more,  
these nights  
are meant for that,  
and for  
me  
because



I control  
you,  
a captive there  
sitting before  
this  
illuminated  
screen.  
you will do as I  
want  
because  
I write  
you,  
not the other  
way around.  
I always have.  
I always will.  
I am the last  
poem of this  
night  
and as you  
sleep later in the  
next room  
in the dark  
you will  
forget about  
me,  
forget everything,  
you with your  
dumb mouth  
open,  
as you snore your  
heavy  
sleep,

I will be here  
waiting,  
immortal,  
and  
when you are  
dead  
and the black  
sky flashes  
red  
for you  
for the last time,  
your dumb  
bones  
will amount to  
nothing  
more  
than  
dust.  
but I will  
live on.

## misbegotten paradise

the bad days and the bad nights now come too  
often,  
the old dream of having a few easy  
years before death—  
that dream vanished as the other dreams  
have.  
too bad, too bad, too bad.  
from the beginning, through the  
middle years and up to the  
end:  
too bad, too bad, too bad.

there were moments,  
sparkles of hope  
but they quickly dissolved  
back into the same old  
formula:  
the stink of reality.

even when luck was  
there  
and life danced in the  
flesh,  
we knew the stay  
would be  
short.

too bad, too bad, too bad.

we wanted more than  
there could ever be:  
women of love and  
laughter,

nights wild enough for the  
tiger,  
we wanted days that  
strolled through  
life  
with some grace,  
a bit of  
meaning,  
a plausible use,  
not something  
just to  
waste,  
but something to  
remember,  
something  
with which to  
poke death  
in the gut.

too bad, too bad, too bad.

in the totality of  
all things, of course,  
our petty agony is  
stupid  
and vain  
but I feel that our  
dreams were  
not.

and we are not alone.  
the relentless factors are  
not a personal

vendetta against a  
single  
self.

others feel the same  
searing  
disorder,  
go mad, suicide, go  
dull, run stricken to  
imaginary  
gods,  
or go drunk, go drugged,  
go naturally  
silly,  
disappear into the mass of  
nothingness  
we call families,  
cities,  
countries.

but fate is not entirely  
to blame.  
we have wasted  
our chances,  
we have strangled  
our own hearts.

too bad, too bad, too bad.

now we are the citizens of  
nothing.

the sun  
itself  
knows  
the sad truth of  
how we surrendered  
our lives  
and deaths  
to simple  
ritual,  
useless  
craven  
ritual,  
and then  
slinking away  
from the face of  
glory,  
turning our dreams into  
dung,  
how we said  
*no, no, no, no,*  
to the most beautiful  
YES  
ever uttered:

life  
itself.

## my big night on the town

sitting on a 2nd-floor porch at 1:30 a.m.  
while  
looking out over the city.  
it could be worse.

we needn't accomplish great things, we only  
need to accomplish little things that make us feel  
better or  
not so bad.

of course, sometimes the fates will  
not allow us to do  
this.

then, we must outwit the fates.

we must be patient with the gods.  
they like to have fun,  
they like to play with us.  
they like to test us.  
they like to tell us that we are weak  
and stupid, that we are  
finished.

the gods need to be amused.  
we are their toys.

as I sit on the porch a bird begins  
to serenade me from a tree nearby in  
the dark.

it is a mockingbird.  
I am in love with mockingbirds.

I make bird sounds.  
he waits.  
then he makes them back.

he is so good that I laugh.

we are all so easily pleased,  
all of us living things.

now a slight drizzle begins to  
fall.  
little chill drops fall on my  
hot skin.

I am half asleep.  
I sit in a folding chair with my  
feet up on the railing  
as the mockingbird begins  
to repeat every bird song  
he has heard that  
day.

this is what we old guys do  
for amusement  
on Saturday  
nights:  
we laugh at the gods, we  
settle old scores with  
them,  
we rejuvenate  
as the lights of the city  
blink below,



as the dark tree  
holding the mockingbird  
watches over us,  
and as the world,  
from here,  
looks as good as it ever  
will.

## nobody but you

nobody can save you but  
yourself.  
you will be put again and again  
into nearly impossible  
situations.  
they will attempt again and again  
through subterfuge, guise and  
force  
to make you submit, quit and/or die quietly  
inside.

nobody can save you but  
yourself  
and it will be easy enough to fail  
so very easily  
but don't, don't, don't.  
just watch them.  
listen to them.  
do you want to be like *that*?  
a faceless, mindless, heartless  
being?  
do you want to experience  
death before death?

nobody can save you but  
yourself  
and you're worth saving.  
it's a war not easily won  
but if anything is worth winning then  
this is it.

think about it.  
think about saving your self.

your spiritual self.  
your gut self.  
your singing magical self and  
your beautiful self.  
save it.  
don't join the dead-in-spirit.

maintain your self  
with humor and grace  
and finally  
if necessary  
wager your life as you struggle,  
damn the odds, damn  
the price.

only you can save your  
self.

do it! do it!

then you'll know exactly what  
I am talking about.

## like a dolphin

dying has its rough edge.  
no escaping now.  
the warden has his eye on me.  
his bad eye.  
I'm doing hard time now.  
in solitary.  
locked down.  
I'm not the first nor the last.  
I'm just telling you how it is.  
I sit in my own shadow now.  
the face of the people grows dim.  
the old songs still play.  
hand to my chin, I dream of  
nothing while my lost childhood  
leaps like a dolphin  
in the frozen sea.

## About the Author

**CHARLES BUKOWSKI** is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *Betting on the Muse: Poems & Stories* (1996), *Reach for the Sun: Selected Letters 1978–1994, Volume 3* (1999), and *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in over a dozen languages, and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come, Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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